THE FALCON MEETS A LADY

DREXEL DRAKE

THE FALCON MEETS A LADY

DREXEL DRAKE

LIPPINCOTT

THE FALCON MEETS A LADY

DREXEL DRAKE

THE FALCON MEETS A LADY

The newest thriller about the Falcon, that Lone G-Man who, with his friend and assistant the Sarge, is in league against the underworld. This time the author makes the scene of their activities Marmont Manor, a hotel thirty minutes from New York City's Forty-second Street. The Falcon and his companion are there for a brief holiday but within a few hours of their arrival the Falcon receives a mysterious package containing $100,000 in negotiable government bonds. And half an hour later, when the Falcon is on his way to his room, he catches a glimpse of a lady hastily leaving a room and rushing into a room across the corridor. When he goes by the open door of the room he is shocked to find a man sprawled on the floor—dead! Before he spreads the alarm, the Falcon wishes to investigate. From then on the Falcon and his assistant are in constant danger, largely through the activities of an unscrupulous gang who are attempting to get back the valuable package that was delivered in error to the Falcon. There are several magnificent fights in the book; its pace is very swift and the climax is original and dramatic.

COPYRIGHT, 1938, BY
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

MADE IN THE
UNITED STATES OF
AMERICA

TO

CAROLYN WELLS

IN APPRECIATION OF HER ENCOURAGING
WELCOME TO THE FALCON WHEN
HE MADE HIS DEBUT IN
THE FALCON'S PREY

CONTENTS

I	FOURTH HAND	11
II	A LADY'S INVITATION	23
III	A PROPOSAL ACCEPTED	30
IV	A DECIPHERED MESSAGE	40
V	DARK ROADS	52
VI	A BODY REAPPEARS	64
VII	BARED SECRETS	74
VIII	ASSAULT IN CLOSE QUARTERS	86
IX	CALL FOR HELP	102
X	FLIGHT	111
XI	A CROWDED POLICE DOCKET	120
XII	HINTED ENTANGLEMENTS	129
XIII	A PERFECT THEORY	139
XIV	TAINTED INTEREST	147
XV	UNEXPECTED CHARGES	159
XVI	A CALL ON THE DEAD	173
XVII	DORIS HALDANE IN COMMAND	183

XVIII	A CLUE UNCOVERED	189
XIX	EXCHANGED INFORMATION	198
XX	ACCURATE TIMING	205
XXI	A HEAVY SCHEDULE	214
XXII	SCAVENGER HUNT	225
XXIII	AN INFORMAL VISIT	240
XXIV	CONVERGING FACTORS	256
XXV	TRAGEDY ANEW	271
XXVI	RETURN DELIVERY	283
XXVII	FILED FOR REFERENCE	298
XXVIII	A DEAL IS CLOSED	311

THE FALCON MEETS A LADY

All incidents and the names of all characters in this story are fictitious. If the name of any living person is used it is a coincidence

CHAPTER I

FOURTH HAND

THE UNIFORMED NEGRO BELLBOY EMPLOYED A FANFARE OF scraping and shuffling as he arranged the table and chairs on the veranda of Marmont Manor. Almost instantly the reason for the distracting preparations became obvious.

A medley of voices preceded the opening of the nearby screened doors of the lounge. Two women emerged, followed by a man whose erect dignity did not conceal his three-score years.

The foremost of the women must have been of near the same age, although there was a preserved vivacity in her eager voice and a studied attempt at youthfulness in her manner.

The second woman was youngish, yet at once noticeably mature. She was handsome rather than beautiful. Her face seemed carved with a certain severity, to match the simple lines of her tailored suit. Her voice was a low modulation, in sharp contrast with the high pitch of the other woman's rapid discourse.

The trio came to a halt after the few strides that brought them to the scene of the bellboy's activities. After a brief delay they established themselves at the table. A fourth chair, opposite the younger woman, remained unoccupied.

In the depth of a large reed arm-chair at the closed end of the veranda, perhaps fifty feet distant, the Falcon stirred uneasily.

"I judge by certain unmistakable noises, old man, that our restful afternoon communion with the valley below is to be ravaged," he said.

The Falcon's words, spoken from lips that seemed barely to part, reached only across to the big man facing him from an identical low-seated chair. But unlike the Falcon, the Sarge completely filled his chair, his ample legs spread far forward.

"Yeh, I guess so, chief," the big fellow muttered, after giving a moment to fathoming the remark. A deep-throated chuckle escaped through his thick lips.

"*Permanent* guests, you think, old timer?"

"Hunh? Oh! I guess they're gonna be with us a while. They've pitched camp around a table down near th' door."

"I had an inkling to that effect," the Falcon observed.

The high back of his chair completely shut off the newcomers from his view. The Sarge, in *his* position, however, half faced the group at the table.

A smile spread across the big fellow's huge features. He hitched his chair a bit forward.

"I got kinda a slice of th' family history of one of th' women down there," he confessed.

The Falcon grinned, his eyes narrowing to the merest slits.

"Perfect timing, you old son-of-a-gun," he accused. "About four hours in this exclusive corner of Westchester, and you've already established contact with probably one of the first families. Let's see! When did I let you out of my care?"

"That's when it happened, chief," the Sarge chuckled. "Right after lunch, when you went for a walk—"

"And you went in search of the most comfortable chair in the lounge. It probably will be more than I can risk, now,

for us to linger here the full week-end."

"I guess maybe it ain't so much risk. It was her made me get tired of th' lounge and come out here for air."

"As bad as that?"

"She dropped a magazine and I picked it up for her and before I knew it we was talkin'—I mean, *she* was talkin' and I was gettin' sleepy."

"The young siren probably was attracted by your 250-pound setup."

The Sarge laughed hoarsely.

"I wouldn't say siren and she ain't exactly young," he disputed. "She was tellin' me about her havin' a son eight years out of West Point. Sixth of th' historic Haldane line, she says, her husband bein' Major Haldane and his great-great-grandfather bein' brigadier or somethin' in th' Colonial army."

"Biographical opportunity knocking at your door, old man."

"Yeh, if you like th' line, I guess it's okay. I guess that's th' major himself at th' table with her now. And they got a snappy lookin' young woman with 'em."

"If you weren't rude when you ran away from Mrs. Haldane, she may make a point of having you meet this more interesting person. I believe I detected just a touch of sentiment when you mentioned her."

The Sarge chuckled as he squirmed for a more comfortable position in his chair.

Both men were attracted by the scraping halt of a train. The Marmont station seemed almost directly below them, alongside the glistening rails that were spun more than a hundred feet below the level of the veranda.

A long line of commuters' coaches that had come out from New York City tarried impatiently to discharge a

blend of returning villagers and arriving Friday afternoon week-enders.

From the veranda, peering through one of the low stuccoed arches, the Falcon and the Sarge could catch only fragmentary glimpses of the station-platform activity. The almost sheer side of the granite bluff capped by the rambling Marmont Manor was screened by the dense foliage of giant trees that had managed somehow to rear themselves out of the rocky surface.

There were only lacy rifts in the foliage to permit a vista of the station, the village plaza, and the far-spread valley that marked the snake-like course of the undemonstrative Bronx River and its complement of winding parkways.

The arrival of the train aroused undisguised interest among the three persons who had so recently invaded the veranda. It exerted an instant check upon the course of their conversation.

"That must be the three-forty," Mrs. Haldane hazarded, craning about in a hopeless effort to observe the disembarking passengers.

Major Eustace Porter Haldane made a function of consulting his watch.

"Yes, my dear," he announced across the table, "it is only some seconds past three-forty."

"These Westchester trains run so charmingly on the minute, don't you think, Mrs. Haldane?" the younger woman contributed.

"Rarely off their schedule, my dear, rarely! It should be only a moment, now, until your friend joins us."

"Are you quite sure he will search for us out here?" the major made a point of inquiring.

Both women were spared answering the question. A bellboy had pushed through the screened doors and come up to

the table unobserved.

"Is Lady Mir'm Wad'm here?" the negro lad inquired.

"Lady *Miriam Wadringham*, certainly, my boy," Major Haldane enlarged, directing the bellboy's attention to the young woman at his right.

Lady Miriam herself took the situation in hand, turning toward the boy.

"What is it?" she asked.

The negro stumbled over his speech.

"Mistah Crane, our man'ger, got a tel'phone call from th' city t' tell you Mistah Cal'ton caint come on out t' Marmont t'day," he said.

There was no mistaking the disappointment that flashed in Lady Miriam's dark eyes. Obviously stunned, she did not speak at once. Major Haldane rescued the bellboy.

"Thanks, my boy," he proffered.

"Yes, thank you," Lady Miriam supplemented. "That was *all* of the message?"

"Only that Mistah Cal'ton said he had t' go th' second way, o' th' second place, I caint say just which."

Both the major and Mrs. Haldane were bestowing fascinated attention upon the discomfited lad. They did not observe the quick change of expression in Lady Miriam's eyes.

By the time the bellboy had departed Lady Miriam had erased the momentary sparkle of startled understanding. The brief tightening at the corners of her narrow mouth had relaxed.

"You won't be able to make much of the latter part of the boy's message, I'm sure," Major Haldane sympathized politely.

"These negro boys at the Manor are so oddly interesting when they feel themselves thrust into importance," Mrs. Haldane added indulgently.

Lady Miriam smiled vaguely.

"It really is of no consequence," she said lightly. "I shall be able to get the exact message from the manager."

"At least we know that he is not coming," the major pronounced.

"And I'm so sorry for you, my dear," Mrs. Haldane said to Lady Miriam. "Something must be done about it, and at once."

A closer observer would have noticed that Lady Miriam, far from being upset, was distinctly relieved. She had passed through an anxious moment when the bellboy delivered himself of the enigmatic message. Either the major or his wife might have been moved to make a point of the concealed meaning it hinted.

But Mrs. Haldane's thoughts were engrossed with her immediate problem as hostess. It had been, she reflected painfully, her own suggestion that accounted for their presence on the veranda. The unexpected dilemma put a demand upon her unfailing resourcefulness.

Mrs. Haldane boasted a lineage as illustrious as that into which she had married. She made her moves and her plans with traditional assurance. The knowledge of her self-efficiency lighted her countenance as now her glance swept to the closed end of the veranda.

Long a permanent resident at the Manor, she nursed a pride that no one of assailable repute could find a welcome inside its walls, although the management, for financial reasons, had been moved more recently to adopt certain limited measures to promote week-end patronage from New York City.

Somewhat in concert with that sustaining faith, Mrs. Haldane regarded it as quite within her province to search out for herself any detectable flaws which the management

might haphazardly overlook. Casual contact, she held, often is revealing—such casual contact, for instance, as that in the lounge earlier in the afternoon with the extremely large gentleman she now spied at the opposite end of the veranda.

She could find no fault with his thoroughly American name: Steve Hardy, she now reminded herself. She had winced, at first, at the *Steve* but had become reconciled at his having shortened it, obviously from his baptismal name of Stephen, when she observed how frankly his large blue eyes smiled.

A bit crude, his words, she remembered, and the heavy voice uncultured, but then he had spoken little. She recalled, in his favor, how politely he had listened to her, moved at her mention of the gallant Haldane line.

The Sarge jerked forward somewhat suddenly in his chair, bending toward the Falcon.

"Cripes, chief!" he mumbled thickly. "Th' old warrior's headin' up here after us."

The Falcon, aroused from his lazy scanning of the broad-spread vista, squinted his amusement.

"You mean the highly pedigreed major you were telling me about?" he queried.

The Sarge lowered his voice.

"Not him, no! It's th' missus, herself."

"And you thought you had escaped by merely stepping out here for air!"

"Sh! She's almost here."

Mrs. Haldane, having a purpose in mind, pursued it directly.

"Oh, Mr. Hardy!" she effused. "I'm so fortunate to find you here. You can come to my aid marvelously. I'm sure you will."

The Sarge had extricated himself to his full, broad stature.

The Falcon, attracting no attention to himself, rose lightly and moved aside.

"Guess I don't mind," the Sarge mumbled uncertainly.

"It's bridge, Mr. Hardy," the woman explained. "Fourth hand, you know? The major and I have a guest. You'll find her delightfully charming. Lady Miriam Wadringham. We were awaiting her friend on the three-forty but he has been detained in the city. I don't *dare* disappoint Lady Miriam. You see, it's really *my* responsibility. You'll join us, won't you, Mr. Hardy?"

The Sarge chuckled as a smile broadened across his huge face.

"I wouldn't mind joinin' you, Mrs. Haldane," he said, "but it'd hafta be somethin' besides bridge."

"You don't play, or are you just being modest about your game? Don't you see, I promised Lady Miriam bridge."

"I guess maybe my friend here would fill th' bill better," the Sarge proposed, with a gesture toward the Falcon.

The latter had been standing discreetly aside. In fact, he had been occupying himself with a not uninteresting study of the young woman at the distant table, whom he had just heard identified as Lady Miriam Wadringham. The mere implication of the title had fascinated him.

At the suggestion voiced by the Sarge, the Falcon turned toward him. He found Mrs. Haldane engaged in appraising him.

There was an awkward moment. Through his long association with the Falcon, the Sarge had never addressed him other than as *chief*. Never before, because of the very nature of their joint vocation, had the Sarge had occasion to introduce the Falcon according to polite requirements. He was struggling now because of the very novelty of the impending ordeal.

Mrs. Haldane, for her part, found herself looking upon a superb example of rigid manhood, not yet turned thirty. A face that was not handsome, but strong, singularly long; eyes piercing sharply from behind barely open grooves.

The figure filled the perfectly tailored suit compactly, revealing the squared shoulders, the taut, muscular lines of the physique.

The Falcon rescued the Sarge. There was no smile, no faintest expression upon his mask-like countenance, but he bowed with an elegance that Mrs. Haldane was quick to note.

"I am Jeffries Gate, Mrs. Haldane," the Falcon said. "Mr. Hardy was telling me about you just before you came up—his delightful meeting with you after luncheon, and the illustrious record of the Haldanes."

"Thank you, Mr. Gate. I'm indeed happy to meet you."

"I heard you mention having a Lady Miriam Wadringham as your guest," the Falcon said.

"You *know* her, Mr. Gate?"

"No, unfortunately. It's only that the mere name could not fail to bring back to my mind my days at Cambridge."

"Oh, how splendid! I positively *must* have you meet Lady Miriam. It's needless to ask if you play bridge?"

"After a fashion, Mrs. Haldane."

"Such a prosaic admission, Mr. Gate. I'm expecting something spectacular."

"A deal or two, I'm sure, will disillusion you."

"At any rate, you are to be Lady Miriam's partner."

Mrs. Haldane needed the walk back to the table to digest her good fortune. The Falcon had instantly captured a front page in her register.

If she marveled that he and the Sarge had fallen into her lap from the same tree, she put aside that puzzle in human

associations for another time.

Mrs. Haldane managed the introductions adeptly.

The Sarge dropped into his spectator's chair, at the Falcon's elbow, with comforting resignation. He was able, sitting there, to study Lady Miriam at will, and to escape the necessity of arduous conversation.

Through something more than half an hour the game progressed into its second rubber. Lady Miriam and the Falcon won the first by a comfortable margin. It was during the brief respite following that initial victory that the Sarge made his excuses and abandoned the veranda.

Conversation had lagged after a short session of pleasantries, despite the recurring efforts of Mrs. Haldane. The major gave himself entirely to his cards. Lady Miriam responded cordially enough but initiated nothing in the way of discourse.

The Falcon, his sharp mind engaged in its characteristic activity, had amused himself with a number of conclusions concerning Lady Miriam, after dismissing the major and his wife with a minimum of deliberation.

The young woman interested him at once because of contradictions he regarded as obvious. He decided that her apparent interest in the game was feigned, although excellent hands fell her way and she bid and played them capably. He was sure her studied effort at smiling veiled preoccupation. He found her not disposed to promote even the most casual references to England.

On occasions he was able to discover her regarding him closely. He suspected it annoyed her that she could not read his eyes through their narrow slits.

A bellboy appeared to summon Major Haldane to a telephone. The cards had just been dealt for a new hand so the others waited.

At the end of five minutes Mrs. Haldane found it difficult to hide her impatience. Five minutes later her expression hinted apprehension.

"You *will* excuse me, I'm sure," she said, rising. "I *must* see what is detaining Major Haldane. It's *so* unusual."

The Falcon rose promptly and crossed to the nearby door, holding it open for the anxious woman. When he turned back to the table Lady Miriam was standing.

"You won't mind, will you, if I use this opportunity to excuse myself for a moment?" she said to him. "Beastly to leave you alone, but you'll overlook it, I'm sure."

She hardly waited for his assurance. He sat down at the table. So absorbed did he become with the thoughts crowding his mind that he failed to take notice of the time. Suddenly it dawned upon him that he had been sitting alone many minutes.

He had just risen from his chair when a young man came out quickly from the lounge. He accosted the Falcon directly.

"Are you the gentleman who was playing bridge in Major Haldane's party?" the young man asked.

"Yes," the Falcon nodded.

"I was asked to give you this package," the young man explained, handing to the Falcon a flat packet about the size of a large mailing envelope. It was bound with ordinary light twine.

Before the Falcon could press a question upon the stranger, the latter had turned and disappeared from the veranda.

Glancing at the packet, the Falcon crossed to the door and entered the lounge. He found it entirely deserted.

He loitered only briefly, then crossed to an arched doorway that opened into the lobby. A clerk idled at the desk. In one corner three elderly women sat in friendly gossip.

Two or three negro bellboys were in evidence. Beyond that, no one.

The Falcon mounted a single flight of stairs. Toying with the puzzle of the odd disruption of the bridge game, he moved slowly to the corridor of the left wing of the Manor, having his own suite in mind. He'd find the Sarge there to join in his examination of the packet.

The Falcon had gone only a step or two along the heavily shadowed corridor when a woman emerged from a door ahead, on his right. She ran directly across to the door opposite, opened it, and an instant later closed it behind her.

The woman, in her haste, failed to observe the Falcon's approach. But for a brief moment she had been clearly silhouetted against the bright glare of daylight admitted through tall french doors at the end of the corridor.

In that instant the Falcon had recognized Lady Miriam Wadringham.

Half a dozen strides brought the Falcon opposite the door from which Lady Miriam had so suddenly appeared. The door stood widely ajar.

The Falcon would have passed on but the merest sideglance arrested him. He stepped to the open door.

A man lay sprawled upon the floor. The Falcon moved a stride forward.

The body was still, arms flung out at the sides. Wide eyes stared in sightless horror toward the ceiling.

The Falcon stood rigid as the truth reached him. The silent, gruesome figure on the floor was that of Major Eustace Porter Haldane.

CHAPTER II

A LADY'S INVITATION

THE FALCON GAVE ONLY SECONDS TO A HURRIED SURVEY OF the room. He had no desire to be discovered alone with the apparently lifeless body of Major Haldane.

He expected the door across the hall to open at any moment, to signal the return of Lady Miriam or possibly the appearance of others she may have hastened to summon.

The room was a bed-chamber of fairly large proportions. Bright afternoon sunlight flooded it through two wide windows. The bed was neatly made and the room was without evidence of disorder.

At one side wall, near where the body lay, a low taboret bore the only immediate evidence of recent human occupancy. An ash-tray contained three or four partly smoked cigarettes, one of which still smoldered.

Beside the ash-tray was an ordinary water tumbler, about one-third filled with a clear white liquid that could have been water.

Only one chair was drawn up alongside the taboret. It was a low cushioned type, faded from long service. The nearest other chair was opposite a window, fully eight feet distant.

The door of a clothes-closet stood widely ajar. A second door, closed, the Falcon judged to be that of a bathroom.

Turning, the Falcon noticed the brass lettering on the outside of the room door, designating the number of the room as B-10. The suite which the Sarge and he were occu-

pying, at the end of the tier, he reflected, would be the third door beyond on the same side of the corridor, numbered B-16. Glancing quickly across the hall, the Falcon saw the raised B-9 on the door through which Lady Miriam had so swiftly disappeared.

Hurriedly, the Falcon stooped to examine the face of the silent figure on the floor. An odor assailed him faintly. It could have been that of a heavy perfume, he thought, yet he found it peculiarly unpleasant. Studying the starkly staring eyes, he noted the widely dilated pupils.

There was no mark on the loose-skinned face, and it would have been difficult to discover evidence of a possibly agonized expression in the countenance naturally creased with deep lines. The lips were pressed closely together but they had scarcely lost their normal color and were without blemish.

But on a tuft of the straggling gray mustache, the Falcon detected the merest filament, as if the hair had caught a spray of talcum powder. A faint smudge of the same white substance appeared on one lapel of the dark blue coat.

In the act of stepping from the room into the corridor, the Falcon's attention was caught by a narrow white edge protruding from beneath the bottom of the open door. Prompted by curiosity, he pushed the door back slightly and stooped to recover what appeared to be a mere fragment of a small white card.

He glanced at it quickly and found that it bore the merest bit of an obviously penciled memorandum. On one line appeared "10. I sha" and directly below it "soon a" spread from one torn edge to the other.

Pulling the door forward the Falcon discovered a second fragment of apparently the same card. Like the first frag-

ment, it too carried a stray portion of a handwritten notation, in two lines.

Across the top was "s of mo" and merely "ance" occupied the narrower width below.

Deciding suddenly against further tarrying, the Falcon moved swiftly toward the end of the corridor.

The Sarge was completely at ease when the Falcon let himself into the living-room of B-16. The big fellow was deposited in a huge couch-like chair that much better suited his bulk and characteristic tendencies than the hard reed chair he had abandoned during the progress of the bridge game.

"Cripes, chief!" the Sarge saluted, blinking his eyes to their normal wide opening, "game busted up so soon?"

"The major became indisposed," the Falcon said cryptically.

"Sick?"

"I have a suspicion it may be a stage beyond that point."

The Sarge jumped up.

"You mean he had a stroke or somethin', chief?"

The Falcon peered at the big fellow from eyes completely hidden, his long countenance without sign of emotion. The lips of his wide, thin mouth barely moved when he spoke.

"I just had the mildly surprising experience, old timer," he said, "of stumbling inadvertently upon our friend, Major Haldane, lying full length on the floor of a room three doors back along the corridor—room B-10, to be specific."

The big eyes of the Sarge flashed their amazement.

"But, chief! How did he get there? What happened to th' game?"

"Nothing happened to the game, old man, except that it ended abruptly when a bellboy summoned the major to a

telephone. Ten minutes later Mrs. Haldane went in search of him. Then your fair friend, Lady Miriam, abandoned me. Oh, by the way! I was just in time to observe her in flight from room B-10 to the room directly opposite. In her haste she left the door of B-10 open, hence my casual discovery."

"Cripes! *Murder*, chief? And her *mixed* in it?"

"Let us regard it for the moment as a fascinating puzzle, old timer. We are hardly justified in assuming there has been a murder. We must remember that we have come to Marmont Manor upon its recommendation as a delightful place for a restful week-end."

"Sure begins to sound restful," the Sarge chuckled.

The Falcon proceeded drily.

"I probably should dismiss the situation as definitely not my concern," he said, "except that I happen to be possessed of two items which just possibly may urge us to attempt a solution of the puzzle. One was thrust upon me—the other I acquired in the process of yielding to curiosity."

While the Sarge looked on, the Falcon went up to a small table. He tossed the packet to one side, explaining to the Sarge how he had come into possession of it.

"Looks phony, don't it, chief, somebody sendin' it to you that way?" the Sarge queried.

"I am extremely doubtful, old man, that it really was intended for me."

"But—"

"You must remember, I was an accidental substitute for someone who had been expected to be fourth hand in the game."

"Some friend of Lady Miriam was s'posed to show up, Mrs. Haldane said."

"Exactly. We shall get into the package presently. In the

meantime, there are these two small pieces of a card that I gathered from the floor of room B-10."

While he spoke, the Falcon placed the two fragments on the table, shifting them one against the other. As always when the Falcon applied himself to an intricate problem, the Sarge looked on silently, his broad countenance radiating almost boyish admiration for his chief.

"They seem to fit at one corner, one below the other, although it is impossible to be sure," the Falcon said without looking up.

"A note, chief?"

"A *minute* part of possibly a significant communication, written on the back of an engraved card," the Falcon recited. "Not enough of the engraving on the reverse side to make anything of it, but some major parts of words appear in the writing—a hint of urgency is apparent even from this small bit of lettering."

The shrill ringing of the telephone bell broke upon the ensuing silence. The Sarge crossed to the instrument.

"For *you*, chief," he called, a moment later. "A woman!"

"*Asked* for me?"

"For *Mr. Gate*, yeh."

The Falcon went to the telephone almost reluctantly. He rejoined the Sarge after only a brief interlude.

"I have an invitation, old boy," he announced.

"Yeh?"

"Lady Miriam Wadringham asks me to join her in her room as quickly as possible."

"In her *room!* Cripes!"

"And it happens that her room is B-10," the Falcon amplified soberly.

"*There*, chief!"

"I'm quite sure I shall find that Major Haldane is no longer defacing the floor."

"You're goin'?"

"Rather opportune, this invitation, old timer. I hope to be able to search, with desirable leisure, for more fragments of this interesting card. Obviously it was torn into many pieces."

"But why would she—?" the Sarge began, then halted.

"It's quite clear to me why Lady Miriam is somewhat impetuously renewing her interest in me, Sarge," the Falcon said.

"Clear, hunh?"

"The little mistake the young man made in delivering that package to me."

"Oh, *that*, you think?"

"That's why I'm asking you to take custody of it, you old son-of-a-gun."

The Sarge grinned as he stepped to the table and took up the packet, slipping it into an inside pocket of his coat.

"I guess it'll be safe, chief, 'til we have a chance to see what's in it."

"And I can truthfully tell Lady Miriam," the Falcon supplemented, "that the package is not in my possession. Not *actually* tell her, of course."

"Not what, chief?"

"Naturally, Lady Miriam does not intend to ask me outright for the package."

"I ain't gettin' it, I guess."

"I rather imagine," the Falcon enlarged, "that Lady Miriam or some of her associates expect to discover the package on my person."

"Cripes, you're headin' into trouble, chief."

The Falcon grinned narrowly.

"Old boy," he said, philosophically, "a man always should expect to head into trouble when he visits a lady in her bedroom."

The Sarge was momentarily baffled, obviously framing a suggestion. The Falcon, amused, yet touched, warded off the big fellow's gathering concern.

"Trouble won't really be waiting for me in room B-10," he said. "The plan, more likely, is to bring it upon me from behind—from room B-9, across the corridor, soon after I have become the lady's guest. I'm quite sure I can rely upon you, old timer, to loiter strategically in the corridor and discourage any such plan."

"I guess so, chief," the Sarge chuckled, a huge smile of relief broadening across his face.

"But I must not keep the lady waiting," the Falcon said brightly.

He paused at the table only long enough to gather up the two pieces of card he had studied so intently, dropping them into a pocket as he moved through the door into the corridor.

When he stood a moment at the door of B-10, preparatory to knocking, a glance told him that the Sarge was ambling slowly in his direction.

That the door of B-9, directly behind him, lacked the faintest crack of being tightly closed, the Falcon dismissed with just a flicker of amusement. He chose to accommodate the suspected eavesdropper by cracking his knuckles sharply against the panel in front of him.

CHAPTER III

A PROPOSAL ACCEPTED

LADY MIRIAM DREW IN THE DOOR, SMILING CONSERVATIVELY. The Falcon, nodding slightly, delayed a moment before entering.

He was willing to assume the young woman would not be able to detect that, in that brief instant of hesitation, his deeply buried eyes were completing a searching survey of the room.

Satisfied that Lady Miriam and he were to be alone in the room, the Falcon accepted her gestured invitation. The telltale crack he had observed at the door of B-9 tended to reassure him that he could safely disregard the two closed doors inside the room.

It occurred to him only casually that the body of Major Haldane could be lying behind either of them—in the clothes-closet or in the bathroom.

"It was inexcusably bold of me to request this visit," Lady Miriam said when she had closed the door.

"Direct approach often is a productive means to an end," the Falcon observed lightly.

Lady Miriam's dark eyes clouded just an instant but, as if she had not grasped the remark, she added:

"And it was extremely kind of you to comply with the request."

The young woman indicated a chair but the Falcon deliberately walked to one offering less comfort, across from

it. He chose to occupy a position from which he could unobtrusively scan the large chair beside the taboret—and also face the outer door of the room.

"The circumstances of my visit here limit me to this one room—you will accept my apologies, I'm sure," Lady Miriam said, dropping lightly to a seat on the bed near the foot, facing him.

"We should find no difficulty in disregarding the furniture," the Falcon assured her, avoiding even the vaguest change in his blankly sober expression.

She smiled faintly, yet annoyance flashed an instant in her constantly changing eyes.

"I desired to talk with you without staging a conspicuous meeting," she said. "Marmont Manor appears to house mainly a relaxed generation that waxes enthusiastic only in discussing the conduct of newly arrived guests."

"For your sake, then, I hope no one was spying from dark corners or around doors when I entered."

She looked at him suddenly but forced a light laugh. He added at once:

"You are newly arrived, then, just as I am?"

"I came a day sooner. That is, I believe you arrived today?"

"Just in time for luncheon, yes, and the beginning of a delightful afternoon on the veranda."

She absorbed that without a sign, saying:

"I am still mystified that the Haldanes should have deserted us. Perhaps *you* saw them again?"

He wasted only a moment in studying her complete calm when she asked that. Her face was not hard. The mellow depth of her dark eyes prevented that. But her mastery of her facial muscles was stoical.

"I surrendered the veranda when it dawned upon me that

I had been totally abandoned," he said, avoiding the question.

"I was much longer than I expected to be," she confessed hurriedly. "I'm dreadfully apologetic."

"At any rate, the game must have become boring to you."

"You noticed that?" she asked; almost anxiously, he thought.

He parried the point with an unexpected question.

"You came as a guest of the Haldanes?"

Her eyes appeared briefly troubled before she decided upon an explanation.

"I am with friends in New York, virtually a resident, you might assume," she said. "I borrowed their car and drove out here to forget myself for a few days. Impetuous exile, you understand? Mrs. Haldane merely appropriated me promptly upon my arrival, the same as I imagine she appropriated Mr. Hardy and you this afternoon. When she learned one of my friends was to come out this afternoon, to drive the car back after dinner, she insisted upon the ridiculous plan for an outdoor bridge game. Are you staying here long, Mr. Gate?"

The Falcon barely checked his surprise when she tacked the direct query to her statement. He found in it an admission of anxiety that must have flashed into her mind belatedly.

It occurred to him that she was wondering if he would be likely to find opportunity to check with Mrs. Haldane the explanation she has just proffered. His cryptic reply afforded her scant relief upon the point.

"I have grown away from the habit of planning a day ahead," he said.

In the ensuing silence a sound reached them faintly from the corridor. The Falcon interpreted it as the closing of a nearby door.

He had little doubt that someone had come out of the room across the corridor.

The discourse of the past few minutes had fascinated the Falcon peculiarly. By nature one to admire proficiency, he found himself enjoying the skill with which Lady Miriam thus far had made it unnecessary to reveal an apparent reason for inviting him to her room.

He was not expecting to learn the reason from her lips. He was convinced that it was expected to disclose itself otherwise.

Watching her intently without appearing to be so engaged, the Falcon saw Lady Miriam's eyes turn at once toward the door of the room when the sound of that closing door reached them. He detected an unmistakable flash of expectancy in the gesture.

To him the woman appeared suddenly at a loss, as if she had reached the end of her lines in a play and someone had missed the cue. She rose from the bed.

"Could I get you a cigarette?" she asked, starting across the room, turning after a step to glance hastily again at the door.

Sounds of a loud commotion penetrated through to them. It seemed to come from directly outside the door. There was a mingling of heavy voices but the words were indistinct.

The Falcon leaned back coolly in his uncomfortable chair.

"Thanks," he said, appearing oblivious of the disturbance, "but I rarely care for a cigarette."

She seemed scarcely to hear him. She took a step toward the door, halted.

"There seems to be some trouble," she said.

"I'm sure it won't annoy us in here," he told her, "and it's folly to walk out into trouble."

She turned toward him, half sensing alarm in his remark.

"I *would* impose upon your hospitality for a glass of water," he said disarmingly, "and I'm still naturally curious to learn why you wanted me here."

She warded off the necessity of meeting the implied question by yielding promptly to his simpler request.

"Water, of course," she said, with recovered politeness. "I'm sorry I haven't something else to offer you."

"I'm afraid I'd still prefer water," the Falcon assured her.

He had suggested it only after satisfying himself that there was no water-bottle in the room. She would find it necessary to go out of the room for it, he reflected. Her immediate remark was curiously related to his thought.

"I'll have to get it from the bathroom," she said, moving toward the more distant door. "I'm hoping it won't be insufferably tepid. Possibly if I let the cold water run a moment, it will prove tolerable."

The Falcon decided he had no hidden surprise to expect when she opened the door of the bathroom. The rumpus still under way in the corridor convinced him the only surprise had been intended to present itself from that direction.

But the Falcon was instantly on his feet almost before Lady Miriam had disappeared into the bathroom. He heard the water running as he stepped across to the chair beside the taboret.

Something that protruded minutely above one edge of the seat cushion had aroused his curiosity.

He leaned down and jerked up the cushion. As he did so a small bit of white card fluttered to the floor. Beneath the cushion he discovered five more fragments. He needed only seconds to gather the scraps, drop them into a pocket and replace the cushion.

His eyes narrowed as the significance of the discovery occurred to him. The card on which a message had been penciled, two fragments of which he previously had found, evidently had been torn into bits by someone while seated in the chair. Obviously some of the pieces had slipped between the cushion and the side-arm of the chair.

The Falcon realized, however, that the eight fragments he now possessed represented not much more than half of the complete card.

In his earlier survey of the room he had noted a small metal waste-basket at one side of the dressing table. Appearing merely to pace the room idly, he passed near the receptacle, glanced into it. He was not entirely disappointed when he found the inside of the basket entirely bare. The fact tended to support a half-formed theory that had flashed into his mind.

He was reflecting vaguely upon the theory when Lady Miriam returned from the bathroom. At the sound of her step he turned. She offered him a glass of water.

As he took the glass from her, the loud slamming of a door in the corridor startled her noticeably.

"Thanks," the Falcon murmured, disregarding Lady Miriam's excitement.

It was obvious that the commotion in the corridor had come to an end. Quiet again prevailed outside the door of the room.

A bare hint of a grin crept beyond the corners of the Falcon's thin mouth. He was thinking of the Sarge, imagining the wholesome pleasure the big fellow must have enjoyed in derailing the intended intrusion that apparently had been so perfectly planned, and yet so completely exposed in advance.

The Falcon sauntered, as if without purpose, toward the bathroom door. Lady Miriam had left it open, the water still running.

When the young woman displayed no concern over his movement, he abandoned his course, losing interest in the bathroom.

He turned back toward her, looking at her quizzically. Her eyes appeared to be framing a question, yet she hesitated.

At that moment the bell of the room-telephone rang shrilly. Lady Miriam walked, half uncertainly, to the instrument at the far side of the bed.

She spoke only monosyllables into the telephone—hardly more than an occasional *yes*. Her pauses were long. She appeared to be wholly on the receiving end of the conversation.

Once or twice a word was distinguishable to the Falcon, as it rasped from the receiver into Lady Miriam's ear. But he gained from it nothing more than that it was a male voice.

It was some minutes before Lady Miriam replaced the instrument. The Falcon had found ample time to complete his scrutiny of the room. He glanced at the scattered items on the dressing table, into the corners of the carpeted floor.

No mark showed where he had beheld the inert form of Major Haldane lying at full length.

The room revealed nothing further of interest—nothing beyond evidence of Lady Miriam's temporary occupancy.

Lady Miriam turned and sat again on the bed. It brought her looking up at the Falcon, standing quietly not far distant. He had placed the untasted glass of water on the taboret.

"I'm sorry about the interruption," Lady Miriam said.

"Merely further apologies from the friend who disappointed me by not coming out this afternoon."

The Falcon detected a recovered brightness in her voice, a regained composure in her manner.

"And now I *must* explain why I wanted to see you," she said, smiling faintly.

When he looked down at her, silent, blankly, she added:

"You *must* have been wondering. But what I am to ask of you is so extraordinary, in view of our just barely having met, that I felt we needed some few minutes to improve our acquaintance."

The Falcon speculated upon the strongly indicated probability that the telephone call just received had much to do with her decision.

"I'm sure we're better acquainted, now that I've called on you in this intimate manner and accepted your hospitality," he said drily.

She looked at him dubiously, forced a vague smile.

"To begin with," she said, "I need hardly remind you that I am in Marmont utterly alone. An unexpected situation, only because of my friend's failure to arrive as promised. Even during our brief meeting at the card table, I was contemplating the thought of thrusting myself upon you."

"You concealed your emotions admirably."

"I mean that I was impressed you would not misconstrue an impetuous call for help. I feel even more at ease about approaching you now—well, now that I've gone this far and find you with such rare common sense. As, for instance, disregarding the furniture in the room. I thought that splendid."

She paused, as if she expected a rejoinder. He waited, offering no sign of encouragement. She hastened on.

"It is imperative that I make a trip tonight, soon after

dinner. I have been told the route but I am not acquainted with the roads. Perhaps you know of the place. A tavern of some sort, not really far from here. The *Wayside*, on *Granger Road?*"

When she waited, he merely shook his head in the negative. He was interested in his study of her and preferred to have her proceed without hint from him.

"My visit there will be short and its purpose could be of no consequence to you," she went on, hiding her mounting annoyance with his severe, staring silence. "But there are reasons why I do not wish to enter the place alone, in addition to the difficulty I may have in finding it. Frankly, I'm asking if you will go with me in my car, as my escort."

She seemed spent when finally she had put the blunt proposal.

"It seems you are inviting me to a very pleasant evening, rather than asking a favor," he said after a moment.

She rose from the bed, saying:

"It's magnanimous of you to put it that way. You've really had me frightened, looking at me so severely while I was stammering over my request."

"I didn't notice—" the Falcon began, but the sharp ringing of the telephone bell, near at hand, interrupted him.

It was hardly necessary for Lady Miriam to disclose this second conversation when she had replaced the instrument. The Falcon had found it simple to grasp its portent.

"It was Mrs. Haldane calling me," Lady Miriam volunteered. "She is greatly worried. She says the major has not put in an appearance since he left us at the card table."

"Possibly he had found the game boring," the Falcon suggested.

"She mentioned *you*, Mr. Gate. Said that she had tried

to 'phone your room; thought possibly *you* may have seen him again."

He had started toward the door while she was speaking.

"Odd that she should suspect *I* saw him again, don't you think?" the Falcon said casually.

The form in which he had phrased the remark startled her. She looked after him quickly but saw only the back of his head as he sauntered on.

Only when he had reached the door, his hand on the knob, did he turn back toward her.

"After dinner, then?" he queried.

"At eight-thirty, please, Mr. Gate," Lady Miriam said, pretending a calmness she somehow no longer felt. "I'll look for you on the terrace, beyond the fountain. My car is parked near there."

The Falcon let himself out into the corridor. For a long moment Lady Miriam stared at the closed door.

CHAPTER IV

A DECIPHERED MESSAGE

THE SARGE ACCEPTED, WITH UNDISGUISED APPRECIATION, the assignment the Falcon laid out for him.

"Mrs. Haldane seems to be just at the point of spreading the alarm of the major's disappearance," the Falcon explained.

"What do you make of it, chief?"

"At the moment, old boy, I have nothing beyond the knowledge that I saw Major Haldane lying unconscious on the floor of Lady Miriam Wadringham's room, less than half an hour after a bellboy had summoned him from our card game on the veranda, ostensibly to answer a telephone call in the lobby."

"Think th' major was dead when you saw him, chief?"

"That was my impression at the time, although he may have been merely stricken, or possibly drugged."

"And Lady Miriam was in th' *know*, whatever was goin' on, hunh?"

"Lady Miriam, let us put it, old timer, was aware of the major's prostrate position in her room, and saw fit to hasten from the room across the corridor to B-9. We must bear in mind she did not leave the veranda until ten minutes or so after the major had gone, and only after Mrs. Haldane had gone in search of her husband."

"But th' hookup with th' palooka in B-9 don't make it look so rosy."

"At least an interesting circumstance, I'd say. You seem to have found it simple to discourage his intended visit to B-10 during my rendezvous with Lady Miriam."

The Sarge chuckled in recollection.

"Nothin' much to that, chief," he said. "Just kinda bumped into him to get things started. When he got to poppin' off, I set him down in front of th' door he come out of and said I'd count three while he was gettin' back on th' other side of it."

"Which probably convinced him that you were in the corridor for the specific purpose you accomplished."

"You mean I tipped him off, chief?"

"I'm not really concerned about his conclusions, old timer," the Falcon said, reassuringly. "The experiment turned out promisingly. It paved the way for an interesting social engagement tonight."

"Cripes, chief! You mean—"

The Falcon interrupted good-naturedly.

"I haven't any doubt that it was the gentleman you treated so unkindly who telephoned to Lady Miriam almost the moment you had urged him back into B-9. Nor have I any doubt that the telephone message led directly to Lady Miriam's request that I be her escort tonight."

"And you ain't thinkin' she means well, either," the Sarge hazarded.

The Falcon grinned vaguely.

"As it happens, she is rather accommodating me," he said. "You see, old man, I'm really *interested* in her."

"Yeh, I *guess*, chief. I can see this is shapin' up like somethin' it'd be kinda hard for us to pass up. What's put 'em on your trail so hot, you think, chief?"

The Falcon squinted at the big fellow thoughtfully.

"Two strands have merely been drawn across each

other," he said. "A package in which our mysterious friends undoubtedly have a major interest was delivered to me, quite by error. Hence their deep interest in *me*. And, as you have so concisely put it, I have stumbled upon circumstances it would be unsportsmanlike to disregard. Hence my cross-interest."

The Sarge tapped the breast of his coat significantly.

"I guess th' stuff in this package will throw a little light," he said.

"Likely, old timer. But for the moment, we have other tasks. I found six more pieces of the card in Lady Miriam's room. I expect to give them my immediate attention. And it is important that you carry out my suggestion down in the lobby. You may be able to gather what is being said about the major's absence."

"Okay, chief. Think Mrs. Haldane will call in th' police?"

"Not at once, at any rate. She is concerned, but I imagine she will give the major a chance to show up for dinner."

"Guess she would, at that," the Sarge agreed as he swung toward the door.

A moment later the Falcon was alone. He pulled a small table up to a window and sat down at it.

From a coat pocket he gathered the eight small fragments of card. Each one bore a bit of penciled writing.

He spread them upon the table, on top of a plain sheet of paper.

Bent over them intently, he shifted them about, striving to match one against another.

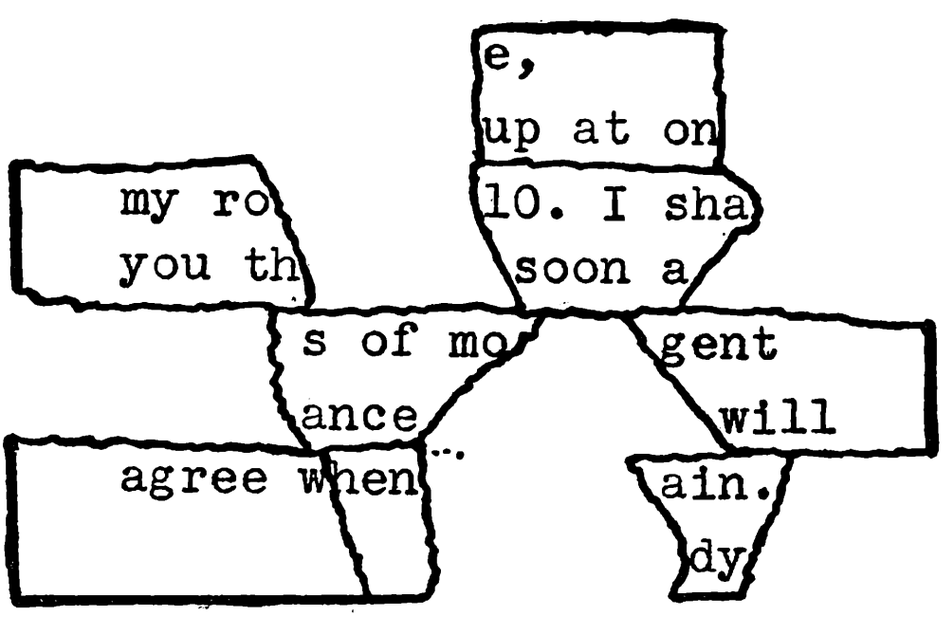
Now and then two edges seemed to fit, or two corners. The straight edges of some of the pieces and the direction of the writing afforded him a gauge to the process.

After working undisturbed for half an hour on the tedious operation, the Falcon had the eight fragments arranged

in what he considered at least a tentative pattern. There were numerous open spaces, convincing him that eight or more pieces of the card were still missing.

But he raised up from his work far from disheartened. As he squinted at the broken, incomplete memorandum there was a curl at each corner of the thin mouth—only *that* in the long, blank countenance to hint the gathering thrill of a scent that had become stronger.

The patched notation at which the Falcon gazed raptly, his wits at work to supply the missing letters and words, appeared as follows:



A part of each of the four straight edges of the card was represented by the assembled fragments but, of the four corners, only the lower left was completed.

The Sarge did not wholly conceal his eagerness to make a report when he breezed airily into the room some minutes later. He found the Falcon still seated at the small table.

"Well, chief, I got a line on what kept th' major from goin' back to th' porch when he finished his telephone talk," the big fellow announced.

The Falcon faced him, unexcited.

"You learned that an envelope was delivered to him when he emerged from the telephone booth, that he tore open the envelope, took out a card and read it, that he headed at once for the stairway leading to this floor," the Falcon said quietly.

The huge mouth of the Sarge dropped half open.

"Cripes! Then you *knew* it."

"On the contrary, old man, I have merely been able to set up that theory by studying this half-completed message. Suppose you glance at it and see what you make of it."

The Sarge, grinning sheepishly, crossed to the table and looked down over the Falcon's shoulder. After some long seconds of wrinkling his heavy brow, he abandoned the enterprise and backed away, laughing broadly.

" 'Fraid it don't make so much sense to me, chief," he confessed. "But you hit on th' dope, just th' way I got it from a bellhop."

"*Who* delivered the card to the major?" the Falcon asked.

"Th' bellhop. Some cluck gave it to him, told him to wait 'til th' major came out of th' booth and then hand it to him."

"And the accommodating lackey, enthused by the tip he had received, carried out the instructions but is hopelessly unable to say who assigned the task to him, I imagine," the Falcon surmised.

"You got it right on th' head, chief. He said it was a young squirt that just walked in th' lobby when th' major was crossin' to go to th' telephone booth."

The Falcon rose and paced the room a moment.

"Well, old man," he said, "we have quite a bit of the situation in hand."

"Yeh?"

"By the way, was anything being said in the lobby about the major's disappearance?"

"Didn't hear nothin', chief, only I ran into Mrs. Haldane sittin' with a couple old hens. She was watchin' pretty close who come along. Looked kinda anxious."

"*Talk* with her?"

"She jumped up and come over to me when I was goin' by. Asked me if I saw th' major. Seemed to think I was just comin' in."

"Express any opinion about the major?"

"Said she kinda guessed th' major had to hurry out somewhere. She was waitin' for him to be back for dinner."

The Falcon stopped short in his pacing and put an emphasis of surprise into his next question.

"You mean Mrs. Haldane did *not* seem to possess the information you had obtained from the bellboy?"

"I'd say not, chief. Th' way it looks to me, she ain't done nothin' about it yet. I mean, she ain't said nothin' to th' clerk or th' manager. I guess even th' bellhop ain't been asked about it, except when I buzzed him without lettin' him think it was important."

"That means," the Falcon summed up, "that she has made only casual inquiries, such as telephoning to Lady Miriam while I was in her room. Yet Lady Miriam turned from the 'phone and told me Mrs. Haldane was greatly worried. That raises an interesting question, old man."

The Falcon crossed the room in slowly measured strides, obviously in a deep study, before he chose to enlarge upon that simple assertion. The Sarge waited, keenly alive to his chief's occupation.

"It takes the form of three questions," the Falcon resumed, halting and peering thoughtfully at the big fellow.

"First, did Mrs. Haldane actually give Lady Miriam reason to believe she was greatly worried? Second, was it Lady Miriam's own knowledge of facts that caused a subconscious suggestion, or an assumption, that Mrs. Haldane was greatly worried? Third, was Lady Miriam deliberately aiming, for a purpose, to have me believe Mrs. Haldane was greatly worried?"

The Sarge drew a huge palm across his smooth chin, grinned broadly, and his eyes beamed boyishly as he suggested:

"Somethin' like one of these psychic tests, hunh, chief?"

The Falcon retained his serious mood.

"I am endeavoring," he said, "to understand Lady Miriam. As I confessed to you a moment ago, she really interests me. There would be considerable point in knowing, at this time, which of the three questions correctly applies to what Lady Miriam told me."

When the Sarge blinked at him in an obvious effort to follow the analysis, the Falcon added:

"Lady Miriam told me she had met the Haldanes only casually, just as *we* were brought into contact with them. Therefore, *would* Mrs. Haldane have disclosed to Lady Miriam, over the telephone, a feeling of alarm concerning the major, and half an hour later discuss the major's absence only casually with *you?* Remember, she took you rather to her bosom and into the archives of her family history."

The Sarge's eyes brightened.

"I'm gettin' your line, chief," he said, frank admiration written upon his broad countenance. "Maybe they's a skeleton nobody wants to let out of th' closet."

The Falcon relaxed, grinning vaguely.

"Exactly, you old son-of-a-gun," he said. "Such a skel-

eton as, for instance, would have caused Major Haldane to act instantly, and without suspicion, upon a written suggestion, unexpectedly handed to him, to hasten at once to Lady Miriam's room."

"You think that was it, chief?"

"Glance at the pieces of card as I have arranged them. We are aided, of course, by a limited additional knowledge. In the first line of writing we have only the letter 'e' followed by a comma. We may assume *that* to be the termination of the salutation, which we may safely suppose to have been 'Major Haldane,' since a message was delivered to him. In certain circumstances, the writer of even a briefly scribbled memorandum is likely to observe the formality of a salutation, this very observance affording an index of the writer."

"You get a lot outa one letter, chief," the Sarge applauded.

"In the next line," the Falcon proceeded, "we find 'up at on,' which we may immediately expand into 'up at once' and dismiss as unimportant the missing words that preceded those words."

"Somthin' like *come*, I guess," the Sarge volunteered, warming up to the process.

"Perfect. Then, in the next line, where we have the left edge of the card, a missing fragment and then a second bit of the message, we find 'my ro——10. I sha——,' which, in view of other facts in hand, we fill out as 'my room—B 10. I shall' and this becomes a virtual encyclopedia."

The big face of the Sarge went blank.

"Yeh?" he inquired weakly.

The Falcon grinned good-naturedly.

"Use of the first person *my* and the number of the room establishes that the note pretends to have been written by

Lady Miriam."

"*Pretends*, hunh?"

"You *caught* it, did you? It is always safer, old man, to go forward slowly, thus reducing the danger of having to fall back. A variety of circumstances occur to me to suggest my caution in this instance, but I'll not go into them now. This same fragment of the note presents a much more interesting disclosure. But perhaps it already has occurred to you."

The Sarge shifted his muscular two hundred and fifty pounds as he chuckled a mellow disclaimer.

"I'm not doin' so bad followin' you, chief," he protested, "but I guess I'll let you stay in th' lead. If you can make any more outa those couple words, I'll just listen in."

The Falcon indulged in a barely audible snicker before he said:

"We are given the most interesting information that Major Haldane must be presumed not to have known the number of Lady Miriam's room—a point to be tentatively entered to his credit."

"Cripes! Sure! I shoulda got *that*, chief."

"I knew you'd find the deduction of primary simplicity," the Falcon said drily.

Accepting the doubtful compliment with a broad grin, the Sarge volunteered:

"It sure begins to shape up, don't it, chief?"

"Up to a point, yes, old timer. We may fairly gather the purport of the remainder of the note. The *I shall* and the scattered words that follow indicate that Lady Miriam was to join the major in her room, and we find evidence of the words *urgent* and *importance* and the hint of a prospective agreement. Beyond that we are faced with conjecture."

"How do you mean, chief?"

"The bellboy told you Major Haldane started at once for the stairway to the floor above. Right?"

"Yeh."

"We happen to know that Lady Miriam was not in her room to receive him. Therefore, someone must have been in a position to have the door of the room unlocked for him."

"That's right, chief."

"Someone may have been in the room awaiting him."

"Sure!"

"Or he may have gone into the room and sat there alone awaiting Lady Miriam."

"But we know she's hooked up with th' room across from her room."

"Which simply enlarges the scope of our conjecture, old man. I hope, among other things, to determine who sat in the cushioned chair beside the taboret. Whoever sat there tore up this card and left about half of the pieces behind—in the chair and on the floor."

"Got a hunch on it, chief?"

"I may have a start in the right direction after I talk with Mrs. Haldane, old timer."

The big eyes of the Sarge popped in surprise at that, but the question that trembled at his thick lips was suppressed as the Falcon turned away. The Sarge knew when it was untimely to interpose a question.

The big fellow glanced through the window at his side. It commanded a view of the formal esplanade that occupied the wide space between the two wings of the Manor.

Closed on a third side by the central section of the rambling building, from which broad steps led down to the court from the porched entrance of the lobby, the esplanade spread out fan-like to a semi-circular drive buttressed

by a low wall of rough-hewn rock. Parked automobiles nosed against the wall, fringing the driveway.

Directly below the Sarge a fountain played lazily from the center of a circular pool. A paved path that narrowed as it drew away from the porch steps encircled the pool and led off in opposite diagonal directions beyond the ends of the Manor's two wings.

Gazing idly upon the refreshing view that was shadowed by the opposite wing from the late afternoon sun, the Sarge suddenly stiffened.

Two men had emerged from the wide doors on the porch, descended the steps and started along the path around the near side of the pool.

"Chief, have a look at this!" the Sarge called softly.

The Falcon joined the big fellow at the window in a few strides.

"Those two clucks, chief! Th' big one is th' palooka that wanted to bust in on you when you was in Lady Miriam's room."

"Splendid! I rather gathered from the noise in the corridor that you were handling more than ordinary weight."

The Sarge chuckled.

"I find the slim, young chap with him interesting also, old man," the Falcon added.

"Yeh?"

"He is the young man who entrusted to me the packet of which you happen to be the present custodian."

The Sarge subconsciously brushed one hand against the breast of his coat.

"That hooks 'em up, chief," he said.

As they watched, the two men moved on to the parking space. They disappeared into a gray sedan. A moment later the car backed from the low wall to right itself in

the drive.

"A New York license plate," the Falcon murmured. "It may just possibly be of service to make note of the number."

"Sure, chief. I got it."

The Falcon turned back from the window.

"And now I suggest that we get ourselves in shape for the dining-room," he said.

"I guess I could eat," the Sarge agreed with unconcealed ardor.

"On that point I never find it necessary to conjecture," the Falcon said, to which the Sarge responded with an unbridled laugh.

But when the Sarge moved through the open door to a bedroom of the suite, the Falcon paused again at the small table. The operation he had in mind occupied only seconds of careful manipulation.

He placed an envelope upon the assembled fragments of card and, pressing it tightly against the sheet of paper, inverted the position so that the envelope lay at the bottom on the table.

Lifting the sheet of paper, the Falcon was able to scan the reverse side of the fragments, still in position as he had assembled them.

His discovery consisted of two broken parts of a single line of engraved lettering, all in compact capitals, beginning on a fragment that provided the left edge of the card at that point. An intermediate and the final portions of the line were missing.

What he read was "CARTHAV——AL COUNSE——"

Without betraying so much as a flicker of aroused interest, the Falcon gathered the pieces of card into the envelope and stowed it in a pocket of his coat.

CHAPTER V

DARK ROADS

IT HAD BECOME IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO SENSE THE EXCITEMENT that pervaded the dining-room.

Of the fifty or so persons at perhaps two-thirds of the tables in the large hall, all but possibly a dozen represented resident-guests. They were almost uniformly of late middle age or older, the women, with gray-streaked coiffures, largely outnumbering the men.

It was yet a day early for more than a sprinkling of week-end visitors from the city. Those on hand, like the Falcon and the Sarge, were at once conspicuous by the aloofness imposed upon them by the calmly assertive functionary who assigned the tables.

They appeared almost stiffly placed, mostly in pairs, at a row of smaller tables along the side wall, away from the choicer places near the palmed, alcoved windows.

Elderly, sad-eyed women sat primly at their places, eating for the most part in silence, glancing ever toward the entrance off the corridor. Among them there seemed not one, as the Falcon studied them, who ate with more than half an appetite because of sharing the anxiety of Mrs. Haldane.

It was obvious that the word had been passed from lip to lip, and the ever straining eyes that sought the partly draped entrance were hoping to see Major Haldane appear and walk with his wife to his accustomed table. For Mrs.

Haldane, too, was missing from that Friday evening assemblage.

Perhaps only to the Falcon and the Sarge did it seem of significance that Lady Miriam had dined quickly. She had been gone from the room half an hour when the Sarge confessed to his chief that he had been amply served—a signal for which the Falcon had been patiently hoping.

They found a place on the shadowed porch, above the esplanade. From where they sat, over at one end behind a low balustrade, they commanded a view of the three long tiers of windows of the left wing of the Manor. The lowest tier was hardly more than a man's height above the shrub-fringed lawn.

Two tall post lamps of ancient design occupied positions at opposite sides of the pool. They cast an uncertain yellowish light across the esplanade, reaching vaguely to the drive and the shadowy outlines of the parked cars.

The benches and chairs, placed irregularly on the lawn back from the footpath that encircled the pool, were unoccupied. Only the spray from the fountain, dropping monotonously upon the aggravated surface of the pool, broke the stillness as the two men puffed silently at their cigars.

"A splendid retreat, don't you think, old timer, to find a spot like this only half an hour from the grinding noise and sultry atmosphere of Forty-second street?" the Falcon mused.

"Yeh," the Sarge agreed, half-convinced. "I guess I could take it a little at a time."

It was an idle exchange, as both men knew, each occupied with thoughts not in the least suggested by their quiet surroundings. It seemed as if by understood agreement they chose to forego speech that would prove an index of their busy minds.

At any rate, it was in furtherance of an understanding arrived at before they had left their quarters that the Sarge got to his feet when the Falcon announced the time as a quarter past eight. The latter had glanced at his watch in the reddish glow of his cigar.

"Guess I'll be amblin' along," the big fellow said thickly, stifling a yawn that the mild September evening suggested.

"Don't forget your way back," the Falcon warned banteringly.

The Sarge chuckled.

"*Is* kinda easier to see this place than to get up to it," he admitted.

He formed a huge silhouette against the dull yellow background as he descended from the porch and followed the path beyond the pool.

But when the bulky figure merged itself with the phantom shadows of the parked automobiles, the Falcon's narrowed gaze ceased to follow him.

He was no longer watching when, from that row of cars, a low gray roadster backed in a graceful arc into the drive and then purred with barely a whispered sound beyond the end of the Manor wing.

Apparently it was of no interest to the Falcon that the Sarge had driven away into the moonless night in the sleek little car that had brought them out from the city. He had diverted his attention, rather, to the long rows of silent windows at his left.

His eyes wandered along the middle of the three tiers, from right to left, beginning at the outer end of the wing.

The four windows at his extreme right, he knew, represented the rooms of his own suite. Allowing two windows for each of the intervening rooms, he counted back to establish the location of Lady Miriam's room.

Of all of the windows in the entire tier, only the two he had settled upon showed thin streaks of light along the bottom edges of drawn shades.

He had mused over the discovery less than a minute when, while he watched, those bare cracks of light were suddenly blotted out. He occupied himself with the apparent significance of that. Obviously, Lady Miriam intended to be punctual in keeping her appointment with him.

He was at once satisfied of her identity when she emerged upon the porch. He waited until she had descended to the terrace before he left his chair and moved soundlessly along the porch.

She had walked ahead slowly, her eyes searching among the benches and chairs. The Falcon did not catch up behind her until she had rounded the pool and taken three or four steps toward the drive.

"We both appear to be commendably prompt," he said, his low tones just reaching her from behind.

She could not arrest her startled reaction to the unexpected voice. She turned quickly and, in that moment, the contour of her strained features stood revealed in the yellow glow from the overhead lamps.

"You aroused me from my search of the shadows," she said quietly. Apparently she, too, chose to speak softly.

When he merely looked at her soberly, standing close, she half turned away and added:

"My car is only a short distance over here. I'll lead the way."

The Falcon followed until Lady Miriam crowded her way between two cars that stood closely side by side. She got into the car on her right—a snug streamlined coupe.

It was apparent that she took it for granted, as she fixed

herself under the wheel and drew the door shut, that he would go around to the opposite door.

But the Falcon waited at the rear of the car—waited just an instant until the woman in the car had turned the switch that lighted the tiny red beacon above the license plate.

In a glance he memorized the number it bore, then moved swiftly to the right door of the coupe.

It occurred to him oddly, as he settled himself on the cushion beside Lady Miriam, that the unbidden adventure into which the brief bridge game of the afternoon had injected him was becoming an ordeal of recording automobile license numbers.

They sat completely in the dark. Lady Miriam had shut off the dash-light after using it only to find the switch.

The glare from the headlights formed two shafts that shot out into empty space above the low rock abutment against which the car stood nosed.

The window at the Falcon's elbow was open. No sound penetrated into the dark, silent compartment from the shadowed group of cars on either side of them.

The motor hummed softly, with only the barest vibration. Yet, Lady Miriam made no move to engage the engine. Her hand had not reached toward the gear-shift.

The Falcon sensed rather than saw that she had turned her face slightly toward him.

"I wish I might make you my *ally*," she said.

The words reached him with an almost unnerving solemnity. Her voice had been low, the words formed slowly, deliberately.

The surprising remark caught the Falcon unprepared. He suspected a genuine tenseness in the woman's mood, although he could not distinguish her countenance in the deep shadow.

He managed to conceal the interest aroused by her enigmatic suggestion. He responded lightly, with just a trace of facetiousness in his tone.

"I thought I had *become* that," he said, "by accepting your invitation to be here."

Her rejoinder came to him so swiftly, so earnestly, that he almost winced.

"I mean *really*," she said with emphasis. "More than just this readiness to ride with me. But I'm afraid I can't make myself clear. I haven't the courage. It must sound impalpably foolish to you."

When he remained silent, puzzling over her almost passionate declaration, she went on:

"You impress me at once as being so marvelously competent. I'd find it so reassuring to depend upon you, I'm certain. Your idea of never planning a day ahead! What perfect relaxation there is in that philosophy."

He found himself marveling, when she paused, at her trick of taking up his own words and building from them—as she had done in her room with his idle reference to the furniture.

In the silence, he was able to determine that she was fumbling in the handbag on her lap. She turned suddenly toward him, this time her whole body pivoting.

"Are you armed, Mr. Gate?" she asked, the question somewhat sharply gasped.

There was a bare hint of a snicker in his cool reply.

"I believe I have a pen-knife," he confessed.

She showed impatience with his bantering mood and pressed seriously:

"Really *armed*, I mean, Mr. Gate?"

"You can't be referring to firearms, surely," he persisted.

"Please take my question seriously."

"Then I'll have to admit I find it too cumbersome to bulge my pockets."

She acted impetuously. Leaning toward him, she pressed a hard object into one of his hands.

"Please take *this*, then," she urged.

It was almost an impassioned appeal.

At once she had the car in gear, was backing it noiselessly into the drive. Unnoticed by her, the Falcon dropped the small revolver on the cushion between them.

The car rounded the graveled road that flared past the end of the Manor wing and veered toward an entrance-way marked by two broad rock pillars.

Beyond that portal, the road began an immediate sharp descent, winding down in wide sweeps from the rocky plateau occupied by Marmont Manor.

A series of such precipitous drops brought the car to a straightaway stretch that sloped downward less abruptly.

At that point the road was a mere shelf cut a little less than halfway up the almost sheer slope. The coupe, coasting down easily, was now directly below the parking space from which it had started.

Along the right, where the Falcon sat, the rising slope was a tangled medley of stubble growth, huge boulders and vine-clad trunks of huge trees that sheered from the hillside at precarious angles, their heavy foliage forming a high ceiling over the road itself.

At the left, a paved walk bordered the road, protected by an iron railing against the lower and even sharper section of the slope. The latter dropped to a saucer-like tableland that had been made into a brace of tennis-courts for Marmont Manor's guests.

Regularly spaced lamps lighted this section of the drive, causing oddly shaped shadows to dance across the roadway

as low-hanging branches were swept by the breeze. From below the smooth surface of the tennis-courts stared starkly with a ghastly pallor reflected from the lights.

A hundred yards on the drive dipped into a final curve that dropped sharply between monitor pedestals of carved masonry, to emerge upon Marmont's principal thoroughfare.

Lady Miriam swerved the car dexterously into the brightly illuminated highway. The village plaza with its intricate scheme of traffic lanes lay outspread before them.

The silent, tense woman at the wheel nosed the car intelligently toward the lane that led to the underpass to cross beneath the railroad tracks that formed the west line of the plaza.

The Falcon's arm dangled carelessly through the open window at his side, a white handerchief fluttering loosely from his fingers.

He did not need to turn his head to observe the familiar low gray roadster that panted impatiently at the curb of the broad highway, immediately beyond the turn from the Manor driveway. He grinned vaguely as he caught, in the tail of a quick glance, the huge bulk of the Sarge slunk far down under the wheel in a successful effort at self-erasure.

The Falcon drew in his arm and disposed of the handkerchief, assured that the gray roadster would hug along not far behind.

Lady Miriam avoided the spur that led down to the Bronx River Parkway but pressed on across the arched viaduct that crossed it. A little later she made the sharp turn that wove into a narrow lane screened from the Parkway by an embankment of trees.

"My next turn is to the left on Tuckahoe Road," she confided.

It was the first word that had been spoken since the coupe had got into motion. The Falcon offered no comment.

As they swayed over bumps in the uneven pavement the headlights of a car behind danced upon them through the rear glass of the coupe.

"The good old Sarge is running no risk of being left behind," the Falcon mused to himself.

After several turns in the irregular course of the road, the Falcon grew to recognize the flash of the pursuing headlights as it reappeared from time to time.

Lady Miriam paused briefly to glance at the road-sign before bearing left into Tuckahoe Road.

"Next off to the right on Grassy Sprain," she recited perfunctorily when Central Boulevard had been left behind.

"You are a remarkably apt pupil," the Falcon volunteered.

"Why?" she asked, half apprehensive.

"The precision with which you seem to be picking the route," he said.

"Oh! Well, I *did* memorize it."

At the moment the Falcon again caught a flash of the Sarge's headlights. It occurred to him suddenly that they could be arousing Lady Miriam's suspicion. He decided upon a countermove.

"Do you suppose we could have been followed from Marmont Manor?" he asked.

"What makes you ask that?"

"I've had a feeling—possibly wrong, of course—that the same headlights have been following us continuously."

Her rejoinder carried an unexpected tone of finality.

"I'm quite positive," she said, "no other car came away from the Manor."

He puzzled over the implications that could be gathered from her statement.

The car swerved to the right just past the glass-encased buildings of a nursery.

"That place was mentioned to me as a guide," she confided, "so this should be Grassy Sprain."

"A guide-post that could hardly be overlooked," he encouraged.

Having fallen into the way of awaiting the reappearance of the Sarge's headlights after each turn, the Falcon received a surprise.

The coupe was suddenly deluged from behind by the glare of headlights that swept in after them from the left. At the same moment the screech of brakes penetrated the stillness of the dark road.

Lady Miriam, apparently oblivious of both circumstances, was sending her car forward at an accelerated speed. The new glare behind seemed almost upon them.

The Falcon's sharp mind needed but an instant to translate what had taken place at the turn from Tuckahoe Road.

Although he had given it no thought at the moment, he had noticed a car approaching from the opposite direction just before the coupe swung for the turn. It occurred to him now, in retrospect, that perhaps the car had not been approaching. It could have been standing still, waiting.

He was satisfied it had been swerved in deliberately between the coupe and the trailing Sarge, quite possibly without suspecting that the gray roadster actually *was* trailing the coupe.

In any circumstances, it was the Sarge's brakes he had heard, he decided. The Sarge had been forced to act to avert a collision, in all probability, and had been forced into

third position in the procession.

Lady Miriam, without slackening speed, bore sharply to the right as the road veered to follow the shore of the Yonkers Reservoir. A moment later the car was climbing through the inky black night to the higher ridge along the east bank of the vast lake.

The newly arrived car seemed bent upon pursuing them relentlessly.

A truth suddenly dawned upon the Falcon. For the first time Lady Miriam had not mentioned the road at which she was to make the next turn.

"There is to be no next turn," he reasoned to himself. "Something is to happen on *this* road."

The Falcon sat calmly, every sense alert. Lady Miriam seemed intent upon demanding every atom of energy from the now pounding motor of the coupe.

Yet the pursuing car hung on their mudguards.

Just past a sharp curve that unfolded into a level stretch of road, the bright headlights behind swept the highway at the left of the coupe. Only for a fraction of a second, then the long pursuer plunged alongside.

Not more than halfway past, the larger car bore threateningly in upon the coupe. Lady Miriam was forced to steer to the right, grinding her brakes.

It seemed merely a fortuitous circumstance that at the exact point the road should afford a widened parking elbow at the right.

The Falcon mused over a thought that fascinated him:

"I wonder if she was really trying to win a race past this spot, which seems to have been so expertly selected in advance!"

The coupe stood panting, nosed in at an angle. The other car had come to a halt crosswise, completely blocking the

coupe in the elbow bend.

The Falcon strained an ear to the open window at his side. He thought he could catch the faintest purr of a motor behind. But there was no tell-tale flash of headlights.

"You have the gun," Lady Miriam whispered. "It's a holdup."

"I was beginning to suspect it might be," the Falcon observed drily.

His complete calm caused her to face him. She could see only a vague outline of his profile, yet she noticed he made no move.

"The *gun!*" she reminded him.

"I'm afraid I'm hopelessly out of practice," he said apologetically.

A shadowy figure was emerging from the car in front. Sitting quietly beside Lady Miriam, the Falcon waited.

CHAPTER VI

A BODY REAPPEARS

THE COUPE DOOR ON LADY MIRIAM'S SIDE WAS JERKED OPEN.

Lady Miriam's right hand sought the disregarded revolver on the seat. But the Falcon observed that she made no effort to grasp it. She merely tucked it behind her.

A flash-light swept upon them through the open door, almost blotting out the vague outline of the man who held it.

"It's a stickup, folks," came a throaty announcement, "but if you act nice they won't be no trouble. So tumble out on this side."

Lady Miriam slid to the ground from under the wheel, the man with the flash-light backing away slowly. The Falcon followed after her.

Only when they were upon the road beside the coupe was the Falcon able to make out that the man, the flash-light held in his left hand, clutched a revolver in his other hand.

A second man approached from the car that blocked the road. When he came up, the first assailant addressed him.

"Better take care of the woman first," he directed. "She's got a bag. Maybe some rings. Let's have a look."

The flash-light was played upon Lady Miriam's hands, causing shafts of brilliance to shimmer from circlets on two fingers.

"Like I thought, maybe, a couple dazzlers," said the spokesman. "Just strip 'em off, lady, and drop 'em in your

bag. Then we'll take the whole business and that'll let you out."

Lady Miriam obeyed meekly. Temporarily disregarded, the Falcon looked on with vague amusement.

He was finding the procedure extraordinarily genteel. Nor did it escape him that the spokesman was rather bungling his effort to affect a throaty voice and crude phraseology.

The second man took charge of Lady Miriam's bag when she had added her rings to its contents. The spokesman carried on with new directions.

"Guess you better pull the car over a little, Slim," he said to his companion. "Then the lady can get back in her bus and beat it. We can take care of her boy-friend better if she ain't around. She's come across okay."

The second man hastened away to the car up front, the engine of which still vibrated softly. A moment later the car slid forward two lengths, straightening its position in the road.

"Better snap away now, lady," the armed spokesman suggested, waving the flash-light to indicate the coupe.

Lady Miriam stood irresolutely a moment. She turned to face the Falcon, close beside her. It was almost if she asked a question, by the mere posture of her body.

"I imagine it would be well to obey orders," the Falcon suggested, his low tone devoid of excitement.

"Sure, it's better that way, or I might change my mind," said the man standing now squarely in front of the Falcon.

The latter thought he detected just a hint of genuine severity in that admonition.

Lady Miriam turned without further protest, passing beyond the arc of the flash-light. A moment later the door of her coupe slammed shut upon her and the little car shot

forward past the larger car ahead.

"Now for *you*, buddy," the throaty tone assailed the Falcon. They stood barely two feet apart, face to face.

At that instant a blaze of yellow flame burst from the deep shadow back along the road. A thunderous report accompanied it, reverberating among the tall tree-trunks that lined the highway.

It did not matter that the bullet from the Sarge's revolver tore harmlessly overhead. It would have been impossible for the man who stood facing the Falcon to forego at least a hasty glance toward the source of that unexpected interruption.

The Falcon, keyed in every nerve and fiber for that exact moment, needed only that split-second of distraction on the part of his adversary.

The fingers of his left hand closed upon the cylinder of the revolver pointed against him and held it hopelessly useless. Timed to the exact instant, the Falcon's right fist lodged against the point of the other man's chin with terrific impact.

Before the holdup chieftain could reconcile himself to his surprise, the Falcon's fist again found the same mark with deadening force.

The victim of the two blows sagged, his fingers losing their grip upon the revolver. The flash-light clattered to the ground.

The Falcon drew back for a blow that seemed scarcely needed, yet once more the sinewy fist shot out with the speed of a steam-driven projectile. The erstwhile bandit dropped, a sodden pulp.

The second man was running back from the car, brandishing a gun, not daring to use it in the uncertain shadow. Yet he himself was vaguely silhouetted in the cross-glare of

the automobile's lights.

By this time the Sarge was beside the Falcon.

The big fellow's revolver belched forth again, but now there was more of purpose in the aim.

The oncoming man dropped his gun to the road as the bullet found a lodging place in his right shoulder. He staggered back to the car, dropping to a sitting position on the running board.

"Okay, chief?" the Sarge inquired.

"You old son-of-a-gun, you have a marvelous sense of humor," the Falcon teased.

The Sarge chuckled.

"I knew you'd only need a break, when this cluck's flash-light showed me th' way things was," he said.

"You might want to add his discarded fire-arm to your collection as a memento," the Falcon suggested drily.

"Yeh," the Sarge agreed, locating it in the road with his own pocket-flash.

He played the light for a moment upon the inert form.

"Like I thought, chief," he announced. "Th' same palooka I had to muss up this afternoon. Hurt him much?"

"The air may possibly revive him," the Falcon hazarded.

"Should we be gettin' back to our car?" the Sarge asked. "Back only a little way, lights out."

"Smart job you made of this, old man."

"Nothin' much, chief," the Sarge disclaimed. "These clucks was just dumb cuttin' in ahead of me. Th' lady skipped, hunh?"

"The gentleman at our feet was quite gallant to her, old timer. He wanted to spare her the pain of witnessing the main event. And that reminds me!"

Without further explanation the Falcon started abruptly toward the car up forward.

"What now, chief?" the Sarge insisted, following after him.

"It just occurred to me," the Falcon vouchsafed, "that I owe it to Lady Miriam to recover her bag. It contains at least her rings and I'm quite sure she expected to get them back."

"Circus stuff, hunh?"

"On that general order, old timer."

They found the wounded man huddled over on the running board, slipping into unconsciousness. The Sarge flashed his light on him briefly.

"It's th' *other* bird okay, chief," he announced. "Th' two we saw from th' window."

"And the car we saw them drive away with, I observe," the Falcon supplemented.

"Yeh. I noticed th' license number."

The Falcon needed only a second to discover Lady Miriam's handbag on the seat of the car, where the wounded man had left it.

Thirty seconds later the two companions had regained their own gray roadster.

"Where to, chief?" the Sarge inquired when he had set the motor purring.

"Marmont Manor, by all means."

"Then you ain't tryin' to find th' joint Lady Miriam was headin' for?"

"We've been there, old timer. The very charming spot we just left."

"But th' dump she told you—th' Wayside on Granger Road?"

"Unfortunately, old man, as I was able to ascertain from the manager of Marmont Manor, there doesn't happen to be any Granger Road in this section of the country."

"Cripes!"

With which ejaculation the Sarge plunged himself into the enterprise of turning the car in the narrow road and heading it back the way it had come.

Emerging from under the railroad structure to cross the village plaza, the Sarge gained momentum for the wide sweep into Marmont Manor drive. But before the low car was fairly upon the first sharp rise of the drive, the big fellow's foot jammed down upon the brake pedal.

The roadway was completely obstructed. The bright headlights of the roadster lighted up a scene that caused both men to strain forward.

At the left side of the road, just ahead, a hospital ambulance was drawn up. Crosswise in the drive a small police-patrol car hovered importantly, its shimmering spot-light playing among the trees of the steep embankment.

In the circle of light cast against the sharp rise of boulders and undergrowth, three uniformed policemen were engaged in a task that imperiled their own foothold.

The purpose of it became clear when the Falcon and the Sarge had looked on only seconds. The policemen were descending from their difficult position, bearing a limp human form.

As the two foremost policemen, backing down, found a footing upon the road pavement, the full glare of the spot-light fell upon the ghastly face that dangled between them.

"Cripes!" the Sarge muttered between his thick lips.

"Our late friend, Major Haldane," the Falcon observed quietly.

"They dumped th' body down from th' hotel grounds as soon as it got dark enough," the Sarge speculated.

"Not quite all the way from the top, old man."

"No, chief?"

"It couldn't have come down this far, through the trees and rocks."

"Maybe not."

"Which is, of course, a starting point for possibly an interesting study."

"Yeh?"

"There is a winding footpath that starts from one end of the parking space. From some point along that steep, rough path, Major Haldane could have toppled over."

"Accident, hunh?"

"I rather suspect that a theory along those lines will constitute the first reaction of the police," the Falcon said evenly. "Which would conform, of course, with the intentions of certain interested parties."

"Looks like a bunch is in this thing."

"I was thinking just that, old timer."

"Besides th' lady, there's th' two palookas we just had to muss up on th' road."

"And we saw them depart in daylight, so it appears one or two others were on hand to attend to the major."

"Sure!"

"Unless, of course—"

The Falcon paused, and a faint snicker barely reached the anxious ears of the Sarge.

"Unless what, chief?"

"We still must allow for the possibility that Major Haldane roused from his stupor, walked out of Marmont Manor and really fell while descending the footpath."

The Sarge chuckled broadly.

"I guess you ain't wastin' much time on that line," he hazarded.

The policemen had deposited the misshapen hulk in the ambulance and it eased its way down the sloping road. Two

policemen scrambled into the little patrol car, turned off the spot-light and sped up the curving drive.

A moment later the Sarge was directing the gray roadster in their wake, although making the climb leisurely.

Before the car was pocketed in a convenient gap in the line of parked cars in the Manor grounds, its lights had flashed against a familiar object.

"You observed no doubt, old man," the Falcon said drily, "that Lady Miriam's coupe is safely restored to its earlier resting place."

"Yeh, chief. She musta made good time. Had to go a long way around, you know, th' way she was headed when they let her beat it."

"I was allowing for that. She must have driven up just barely before the body of Major Haldane was discovered."

"Sure! A little later she'd a-been held up like we was. She got a break."

They were following the path toward the pool, making their way slowly to the Manor porch. The Falcon glanced up at the long wing at his right.

Numerous windows of the three tiers showed yellow rectangles of light, but the Falcon's interest settled upon two in the middle tier marked by two thin streaks—the two he had observed earlier from the porch corner.

"Clever individuals, old timer," he said, "often *direct* events in a critical situation, and the lay observer may be too ready to find evidence merely of so-called *breaks*."

The soberly voiced axiom brought the Sarge up abruptly. He peered quickly at his chief, his curiosity aroused, but he followed on in silence.

They crossed the porch and entered the lobby. They were just in time to catch a glimpse of the backs of two uniformed policemen who were disappearing into an office

at the side of the clerk's desk.

A scattering of persons seated about the lobby stared after the officers, their faces revealing the wave of curiosity that had been awakened.

But the Falcon and the Sarge moved on to the stairway and sought the floor above. Their steps were soundless as they trailed along the carpeted corridor.

Opposite the door of B-10, they halted. For just a moment, the Falcon strained an ear close to the door. Almost at once he moved on.

They had almost completed the distance to the door of their own quarters, last in line, before the Falcon said softly:

"Lady Miriam seems to have an invariable custom of entertaining gentleman callers."

"Thought I heard a man's voice through th' door," the Sarge said.

The Falcon turned his key in the door of B-16—pushed it open.

His right hand probed for the light button inside, just beyond the moulding. His forefinger was at the button when suddenly he arrested the motion.

He stood for an instant tense, alert—the Sarge drawn up at his shoulder.

The room inside was dark, except for vague shafts of grayish light that sprayed through the windows from the esplanade below.

But against the dark background of the floor, at one side, a silvery streak of light had danced for just a split-second while the Falcon's finger tarried at the wall switch.

It had trespassed through the partly open door of the adjoining bedroom. It disappeared at once but, in the moment that followed, the scraping sound of a drawer open-

ing reached the two listening men distinctly.

The Falcon led the way into the dark room, the Sarge at his heels.

When they were inside, the Falcon noiselessly closed the door, shutting out the dim light from the corridor.

For just a moment of indecision, they stood shoulder to shoulder, listening.

CHAPTER VII

BARED SECRETS

THE FALCON MOVED STEALTHILY TOWARD THE HALF-OPEN door at the side of the room. In the vague light from the windows he could barely distinguish its outline.

The Sarge, his right hand closed about his huge service revolver, cut toward the opposite wall to gain an angular view through the opening into the bedroom.

Only cautious movements from beyond the open door broke upon the almost breathless silence.

The thickset figure of a man, only vaguely outlined, crouched over an open drawer of a dresser. He was engaged in a nervous search, aided by the small circle of light from a flash he played into the drawer.

While the Falcon watched, the prowler stooped to open a lower drawer, and plunged at once into exploring it.

The Falcon was measuring the distance—tensing himself for action. With the search of that drawer completed, he realized, the intruder would abandon the dresser. The latter's present position, back toward the open door, offered the Falcon a strategic advantage he had no wish to sacrifice.

There was the breathless split-second—an unspoken signal to the Sarge who stood straining forward. Then the tension was snapped.

A sharp series of staccato knocks sounded against the corridor door of the room. Two quick raps, then two more after a brief pause, then a single resounding whack.

The figure bent over the dresser straightened, appeared to stand rigid, listening.

The Falcon drew back instantly from the door. He crossed the room, his soft tread muffled by the thick rug. He drew up alongside the Sarge.

The identical series of knocks was repeated, this time more sharply. The Falcon dropped a hand lightly upon the Sarge's right forearm. It was a gesture of restraint.

The Falcon was convinced that no visitor intending a call on *him* was announcing himself. He surmised, from the exact formula followed in both instances, that the knocking was a code signal to the man in the other room.

That deduction became a certainty a moment later. The man in the bedroom turned away from his occupation and came toward the living-room.

Withdrawing toward the farthermost corner of the room, the Falcon and the Sarge hugged into the deep shadow against the wall. Where they stood, there was little prospect that the stranger, lighting his way, would discover them.

The prowler, in fact, appeared to be making his way boldly toward the corridor door. It was evident the summons was no cause of alarm for him.

He pulled open the door. The dim light of the corridor revealed a man of medium build, somewhat more than average in height. He wore a dinner jacket, the wide satin lapels casting a shimmer of reflected light.

The man inside the room, his flash-light extinguished, appeared to be of broader frame, although slightly shorter, as he formed a solid silhouette against the frame of the open door.

The newcomer spoke first, snapping a terse question.

"Any luck, Slug?" he demanded.

"Not a damn scratch, Cart," the other snarled.

"Cover everything?"

"Ain't been all over the dump, yet. Geez! I ain't had time. What th' hell?"

"Never mind the alibi. You'll have to break off."

"What's up?"

"This fellow Gate got loose. Probably on his way back here now."

The man inside the room stiffened. He half turned, the corridor light setting out his profile.

"Geez, what dumb bastards!" he exclaimed. "Maybe the dame went sour, hunh?"

"She carried out okay," the other corrected, growing surly. "Something went wrong later."

"What?"

"I didn't get the story of how it happened, but the young fellow Mullins took with him—Mullins calls him Slim—just 'phoned and said Gate got away. This Slim is the bird that messed up this whole deal this afternoon."

"What th' hell was the matter with Stokey? Geez! He musta gone yellow."

"Slim says Stokey Mullins was laid out cold on the road. Slim was clipped in one shoulder but he managed to get away with the car and find a telephone."

"Leavin' Stokey there?"

"That's another reason you have to be moving out of here," the man in the hall insisted impatiently. "Slim couldn't handle him with his lame arm. He's driving back. You'll have to get back out there with him and pick up Mullins."

"Geez, a dumb egg like that ain't worth th' gas," the shorter man said venomously.

The eyes of the other man flashed angrily. His voice interrupted raspingly.

"You're having too damn much to say, Slug," he warned. "I'm still giving orders and I'm not asking advice. I'm *telling* you to come along."

Slug was instantly tamed.

"Okay, Cart," he whined.

"We're getting down the side way again. The police are in the lobby on that other—"

The remainder of the remark was cut off from the strained ears of the Falcon and the Sarge as Slug shuffled out into the corridor and pulled the door shut after him.

The Falcon was instantly across the dark room and at the door. Without a sound he pulled back the door a bare two inches.

He was just in time to see the two figures disappear through the tall french doors at the end of the corridor, less than a dozen feet from where he stood.

With only a nod to the Sarge, the Falcon slipped swiftly to the french doors. They opened upon a circular balcony, half inset into the building.

The voices of the two fugitives came up to him. They were descending a spiral iron stairway that led down to a similar balcony landing at the floor below.

That oddly designed structure, appended to the extreme end of the Manor wing to serve both as a recreational facility and as an emergency fire-escape, was completely shrouded in the black night. The corner of the wing cut off the rays of the esplanade lamps.

The Falcon felt his way to the iron stairway and descended softly. The men ahead had gone beyond the lower balcony, following the final spirals of the structure to the ground.

From the rail of the lower balcony, the Falcon saw the two men pause as they reached the corner of the wing,

silhouetted against the lighted area of the esplanade. A third man stepped out of the shadow to join them.

The voices carried easily to where the Falcon stood, almost directly above them.

"He ain't showed up *yet*," the newcomer announced.

"I'll wait around here with you, Koster," was the response. "Slug has to get away on something else. You've got to work quiet while the cops are around the place."

"Leave it to me, Cart," came the assurance of the newcomer.

One shadowy form drew apart from the others and lost itself beyond the edge of the esplanade. The other two men drew back into the shadows against the wall.

The Falcon crept back to the balcony of his own floor. He encountered the Sarge at the end of the brief climb.

"It'd be a pipe, chief, to blot 'em all out from here," the Sarge whispered thickly.

"Easy, but premature, old timer."

"Yeh?"

"The gentlemen below are posted there for the precise purpose of erasing me, which lends possibly a tinge of reasonableness to your burning desire. But it happens that we returned just a flash too soon. The young man we heard identified as Slim was a trifle late, it seems, in reaching a telephone."

"But that don't make 'em rate a pardon, chief," the Sarge remonstrated. "They'll only be around to give us trouble later."

"To help us along with essential information, rather, I'd say," the Falcon corrected. "We'd really be handicapped without them."

The Sarge chuckled softly.

"Well, that ain't a bad slant," he conceded. "They sure

spilled some stuff for us a while ago."

"Precisely, you old son-of-a-gun. Let's get into the room. I'm still burdened with Lady Miriam's handbag, which suggests that I make a telephone call. The lady is quite alone in her room now."

"Think so, chief?"

"Beyond a doubt. It was the voice of the gentleman called Cart I was able to overhear through the closed door of B-10 when we paused there."

"Looks kinda like he's *runnin'* th' circus, hunh?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes, old timer. But at the moment he happens to be taking time out in the vain hope of staging an unexpected reception in our honor down below."

"I'd kinda like to bump up against him on a proposition like that," the Sarge insisted, as he followed the Falcon into the room that had been the scene of their recent breathless vigil.

But this time the Falcon lost no time in pressing the button that flooded the large living-room with light.

As the Sarge closed the door behind them the Falcon went at once to a table and gave his attention to Lady Miriam's handbag.

"I suspect," he observed, "that our lighted windows will be noticed by our friends outside. Which means that Lady Miriam probably will have only a brief time alone in her room."

The Sarge dropped into an arm chair, spread out his legs and contented himself with watching his chief.

"I should have been surprised to find much in this bag aside from the two rings contributed to the staging of the holdup," the Falcon murmured.

"Nothin' else, hunh?" the Sarge prodded.

"Nothing of the least consequence," the Falcon responded absently. "The lady was traveling light."

"Not takin' any chances, I guess, knowin' she was gonna hafta pass over th' bag."

The Falcon was examining the two rings, looking inside the thin bands. He dropped them back into the bag after a hurried scrutiny.

"The name *Miriam* appears in one of them," he announced.

"Yeh? So *that's* okay."

"The initials *M. I.* in the other are less easily interpreted."

"Unless they was her initials before she was married," the Sarge opined.

The Falcon snickered.

"Being less apt in deciphering women at a glance, old timer, I had overlooked the possibility that she may be married."

The Sarge squirmed and his broad face reddened.

The Falcon's fingers discovered a small side pocket in the bag. He slipped out from it four or five evenly matched white cards. They were identical, each carrying a single engraved line.

He glanced quickly at the Sarge, his narrowed eyes hinting discovery.

"After all, the bag isn't exactly a dead loss," he said. "The lady omitted to remove her professional cards."

"You got th' *lowdown* on her?"

"On the contrary, old man, her cards happen to be sparingly informative. But highly enlightening."

The Sarge wrinkled his wide brow.

"I could make a lot out o' that if I could figure what it means," he chuckled.

"Let me illustrate," the Falcon said. "The single engraved

line on the cards—*Carthaven Social Counselors*—of itself discloses nothing. But we happen to know that parts of that same engraved line appear on the reverse side of the fragments I found in Lady Miriam's room this afternoon."

"Th' note that got Major Haldane to rush to her room!" the Sarge exclaimed with a flash of enlightenment. "Then she *did* write th' note, chief!"

"A hasty assumption, old boy. Let us be content, for the moment, with the discovery that Lady Miriam carries cards identical with that on which the note was written."

"But, cripes, chief! It was *her* room, she was *there* with th' major, and *now* these cards. It adds up against her."

The Falcon squinted down at the Sarge.

"I have learned to have a deep respect for your keen perception, where a woman is concerned," he said soberly. "I recall that, earlier this year, with no more than a glance across the footlights, you were unwilling to assume that Delvina * was as deeply enmeshed as circumstances made her appear. Your doubt in her behalf was fully vindicated, yet you based it only on the impression you formed while looking at her in the spotlight, as I recall."

The Sarge fidgeted and his thick lips moved uncertainly. His clear blue eyes took on almost a boyish expression as he looked up widely at his chief. Finally a broad smile spread across his face.

"This time, chief," he pleaded, "you'll have to leave me out on that kinda proposition. It ain't in my line to figure a dame that's *cold*. A face like this Lady Miriam's got don't tell me nothin'. Maybe that puts me against her. She's a class I don't dope out easy. So I ain't doin' no guessin' about her."

The Falcon grinned, and there was just a moment during

* See "The Falcon Cuts In."

which the deep affection between the two men commanded their silence. It was an affection that had been wrought through a long series of trials and hazards faced together in the precarious career to which they had dedicated themselves.

"You'd *never* intentionally misjudge anyone, you old son-of-a-gun," the Falcon said, his voice coming as near as it ever did to hinting emotion.

"I ain't never found *you* wrong, chief," the big fellow parried.

The Falcon turned quickly and crossed to the telephone. At that instant the syncopated measures of a blatant dance orchestra drifted through the windows from across the esplanade.

Hesitating a moment at the instrument, and glancing at his watch, the Falcon said: "The Manor's week-end festivities appear to be getting under way. Just ten o'clock."

"Guess th' program can't be held up just 'cause there's a sad widow in th' joint," the Sarge suggested.

"Widow? Oh, Mrs. Haldane. I doubt, old fellow, that she is aware of her widowhood."

"That's right, chief. Ain't been time, yet."

"But that music suggests a different idea," the Falcon said.

Without offering to explain the remark, he raised the telephone instrument. He asked the operator for room B-10.

When Lady Miriam's voice came to him over the wire, he identified himself briefly. He thought he detected a gasp of surprise when she inquired, rather impetuously, "Where are you, Mr. Gate?"

"I've just returned to the Manor," he said. "I'm in my room. I'm rather eager to relieve your anxiety."

He let her puzzle over that for a moment before he added:

"About your rings, I mean. I'll be happy to restore your bag to you."

"You have *that?*"

"I managed to salvage it."

"How *amazing*—and how *kind* of you! Do you mean—"

"The music of the orchestra in the supper-grill is just reaching me. It gives me an idea. Perhaps you'd spare an hour or so."

He waited while she debated the suggestion.

"Splendid," she finally decided. "It will be thrilling to learn how you escaped. Not hurt in any way, I hope?"

"I seem rather whole. I'll await you in the loge outside the grill?"

"If you will, Mr. Gate. Splendid! Say, in half an hour."

"Thanks."

The Falcon turned from the restored telephone. The Sarge lay sprawled in his chair, feet forward.

But the curious interest that shone in the wide blue eyes was to be ignored for the moment. With a characteristic shift of his rapid mind, the Falcon swerved to another subject—returned, rather, to one that had been abandoned.

"Getting back to this engraved name on Lady Miriam's cards, Carthaven Social Counselors, does it tie up in your mind, old man, with anything recent?"

The Sarge hesitated, taken by surprise.

"It don't hit me right now, chief."

"If a man's name should happen to be Carthaven, it is quite natural that his intimate associates would address him as *Cart*, wouldn't you say?"

The Sarge straightened in his chair.

"Cripes! That bird we caught in here *did* call th' other guy *Cart*, chief."

"On several occasions. We were provided with a fair catalogue of names, besides a reliable close-up of this Cart and the gentleman so descriptively alluded to as Slug."

"A palooka as yellow as you find 'em, that Slug, I'd say. He showed his tag when Cart put him in line with a hard look."

"I have an idea, old man, that our friend Cart is not quite as soft as the satin on his coat lapels."

"He must have a racket we ain't never bumped into, chief. Cripes! I guess this package I'm nursin' for you would tell th' story."

"Possibly, Sarge, but we'll have to delay looking into it a little longer."

"Sure, seein' you're dated up for society."

Ignoring the sally with a grin, the Falcon said: "Going on, we find that our newly found friends include one Koster, whom I observed only as a shadow from the lower balcony."

"Koster, hunh? Then there's Slim and Stokey Mullins, if he gets over th' headache you gave him."

"At any rate, we are assured that Cart and Koster are on the premises, with the other three as possible later arrivals, in or out of good repair."

"Slim with one bad wing," the Sarge supplemented.

"We gathered one other important detail from our fortunate presence in this room, old man."

"Yeh? Guess I missed it, chief."

"You may recall that Cart said to Slug, 'we're getting down the side way *again*.' That would imply a previous trip by the same route."

"Sure it would."

"It's just my idea that the first journey down the iron stairway may have been made in transporting the body of Major Haldane from this corridor to the grounds of the Manor."

"Cripes! You've *hit* it, chief."

"Which reminds me that in our preoccupation we have failed to investigate the extent to which our inconsequential possessions have been ravaged by the fruitless search of our friend Slug."

"Nothin' much he could find, chief."

"Not so long as you keep that fat packet safely in your inner pocket."

The Falcon started toward the door of the bedroom.

"We may want to tidy up a bit for the evening's diversion, old man," he suggested.

"Me, too, chief?"

"I believe we came on this week-end jaunt together."

A smile enveloped the Sarge's face.

"But I wasn't sure about this date you just cooked up," he apologized.

"Lady Miriam has half an hour to conclude arrangements with her associates," the Falcon detailed blandly. "I shall be disappointed in her if Cart and one or more of his legionnaires do not establish themselves strategically at a table in the supper-grill in advance of my scheduled appearance."

"And we're bustin' in on th' setup?"

"I've committed myself, old timer, to meet Lady Miriam in the loge outside the grill at ten-thirty."

"*Outside* th' grill, hunh?"

CHAPTER VIII

ASSAULT IN CLOSE QUARTERS

THE LOGE IN MARMONT MANOR WAS A NARROW PASSAGE that opened off the lobby alongside the arched entrance into the lounge. Because of its unusual length and low beamed ceiling, it had almost the appearance of a tunnel.

In the quaint, whimsical plan on which the Manor had been spread out, the loge served in effect as a bridge, linking various units of the structure.

Following the passage from the lobby, the first opening occurred on the left. That consisted of a low square doorway, where three shallow steps led down to a card-room of modest dimensions.

Passing that opening with an easy, unhurried stride, the Falcon, by a mere glance, satisfied himself that the Sarge occupied the post that had been determined upon by prearrangement. The big fellow was leaning lazily against the frame at one side of an open french door that connected the card-room with a small rock-paved open court.

Beyond the card-room, the left side of the loge passage became a series of low, wide windows, affording much the same sheer panorama as that gained from the open veranda outside the lounge. The veranda and the extension of the loge formed, in fact, an angle virtually defining the outer ridge of the rocky promontory from which the Manor looked down upon the village square.

The loge terminated, perhaps fifty feet farther on, in an

odd, square, tower-like structure of stuccoed masonry that housed little more than shafts for two elevators. It was by that means that guests of the Manor could descend the distance of seven or eight ordinary floor-heights, and by use of a long tiled passage at the bottom level find egress to Marmont's main thoroughfare without following either the drive or footpath that descended so sharply from the opposite side of the Manor.

About midway between the door of the card-room and the cubicle in front of the elevator doors, a wide opening off the right admitted to the spacious quarters of the supper-grill. It was a point promptly identified, at the moment, by strident measures of dance-music.

Cushioned benches were placed against the wall on either side of the grill entrance, which made of it a convenient, although cramped, quarters for reception purposes.

The Falcon, by design, was approaching the grill five minutes ahead of the time of his appointment. He did not proceed as far as the entrance opening but dropped lightly onto a nearer bench.

It became obvious, as he sat there engaged in casual observation, that the supper dance drew more from the younger outside residents of Marmont than from the sedate population of the Manor itself. Couples and groups approached from both ends of the long passage, some deposited by the ascending elevators and others arriving by way of the Manor's main entrance off the esplanade.

Lady Miriam came along, not far behind a couple that had arrived by the latter route and emerged into the loge from the lobby. The Falcon had a moment to study her.

She appeared, in the subdued light of the passage, almost stately. A slender figure, appareled in a modishly simple gown, accentuated her somewhat more than average height.

She moved toward him with an easy grace, her head severely erect. Her features, completely in repose, gave a marble-like cast to her handsomely moulded countenance, in which the wide, dark eyes afforded the only shadowed relief.

Her thick, coarse hair, flashing its copper tint in the suffused light, was drawn back from the forehead and temples. It added a hint of length to the face and emphasized the prominent cheek-bones, high above the almost pointed chin.

The Falcon rose when she was yet a few steps away. There was no smile in her recognition, just a slight opening of the narrow mouth.

"I haven't kept you waiting, I hope," she said perfunctorily.

The low, smooth voice seemed kinder than either the stiffly formal phrasing or the impersonal expression on her face.

But the Falcon put at least a tinge of warmth into his rejoinder.

"On the contrary," he said, "I'm sure you have arrived on the exact second."

"So kind of you. I see you have my bag."

The Falcon held it toward her.

"It's a privilege to restore it, Lady Miriam."

"How amazing to get it back from your hands! The predicament seemed so utterly hopeless for you when I ran away in such cowardly fashion."

"You really had no choice."

"Yet, it was annoying to appear so positively selfish, Mr. Gate. And how you must have turned the tables! It makes my position *now* almost ridiculous."

"It may have been your forced desertion of me that enabled me to reverse the situation."

"You're being kind. I'm very grateful. It's the rings, of course, I'm happy to have back. The bag really contained nothing of value."

It occurred to the Falcon that her manner and speech were sharply in contrast with the touch of intimacy she had affected during their brief exchange in the coupe. He peered at her closely, found himself marveling at her composure.

It was inherent in him to admire expert skill. The prospect of crossing wits with her fascinated him.

"Well," he observed lightly, "now that I've accomplished the purpose of our meeting?"

She glanced at him, surprised.

"You suggested the supper-grill, I believe," she challenged.

"I suggested meeting you *here*," he said, avoiding undue emphasis of the correction.

When her eyes questioned, he added:

"I've been watching the arrivals disappear into the grill. And I've been listening to the orchestral outburst."

"You could scarcely escape *that*."

"Both factors discouraged closer contact."

She drew up, chagrined, but he went on hastily:

"For purposes of conversation, I'm sure we'd find the syncopation agreeably strained by the time it reaches the tap-room."

Her thin eyebrows went up perceptibly.

"The *tap-room?*" she queried.

"Not a great many steps from this point. The Manor is a unique maze of component units. I found my exploration of it highly fascinating."

"I seem to be less well acquainted, despite my longer residence here," she confessed coldly.

He found her confusion amusing.

"You may have noticed the card-room—the small room off to your left as you came along just now?" he asked.

"I didn't really notice."

"Halfway back to the lobby. At any rate, the tap-room is directly connected with it. Shall we inspect it?"

He swung about boldly to accompany the question. Lady Miriam was at a loss. He watched the guarded expression in her eyes.

She was, of course, at a disadvantage. She could not easily insist upon the supper-grill.

Yet it was obvious to the Falcon that his unexpected suggestion conflicted with her own purpose. He did not doubt that a staging, such as he had described to the Sarge, had been effected on the other side of the grill doors.

Lady Miriam's decision startled him by its suddenness. She fell in beside him.

"It strikes me as splendid," she said. "I'm sure we'll enjoy the tap-room."

He turned his head to glance at her as they started along. There had been a warmth in her words when she expressed the surrender.

They made the brief descent into the card-room. It was at once apparent that the small quarters served primarily as an adjunct of the tap-room.

Glass-topped tables, arranged according to a rigid pattern, left barely more than the necessary space for chairs.

At the late afternoon cocktail hour the limited facilities of the room probably would have been taxed. But now only two of the tables were in use.

Four men were engaged in cards at one table. At another, three middle-aged matrons were appraising speculatively the tall glasses which a waiter had just set before them.

The Sarge was not in view. But the Falcon's narrowed

gaze caught a familiar shadowy outline in the vague light beyond the open french doors.

The Falcon directed Lady Miriam toward the left. They needed to pass only two tables to reach a wide opening that disclosed a second brief set of descending steps.

The odd approach to the tap-room, as well as its curious architecture, lent an impression of a miniature ship's saloon located between decks. The double descent from the loge, interrupted only by the level of the card-room, produced a sense of penetrating underground.

The dull light of the long, narrow room in which the Falcon and Lady Miriam found themselves promoted the illusion.

The shallower end immediately to the left was spanned by a narrow but ornate bar. Its dull-finished top offered only a somber, deep-rose tinted reflection of shaded ceiling lights.

The narrow space in the opposite direction was occupied by perhaps a half-dozen booths along each side wall. The partitions between the booths were hardly more than low screens.

At first glance upon entering the room, the area between the rows of booths appeared deeply shrouded in shadow. The light above the bar penetrated it only faintly.

At the wall in each booth, a small frosted lamp of quaint marine design shed only a vague splash of light upon the table below it.

Lady Miriam accepted her surprise without remonstrance. It was only when they were seated, facing each other in one of the booths, that she offered even a hint of her thoughts.

"We have succeeded in challenging the tongues of the Manor gossips, don't you agree?" she suggested.

"Even after you undertook to avoid that very possibility by inviting me to your room this afternoon," he said.

The quietly spoken reminder caused her a moment of annoyance, but she shook it off.

"We probably came *in* here successfully enough," she parried, "and the lighting arrangement spares us while we are here. The danger, I imagine, lies in discovery upon leaving."

His spontaneous rejoinder caught her unguarded.

"Do you consider, then, that we shall be facing danger when we leave here?"

The hidden implication in the question did not escape her.

"Quite possibly you and I shall be able to bear up, even if we do arouse idle tongues," she hazarded.

She laughed lightly when she had said that, yet it pretended a lightness she did not feel.

Her brief series of contacts with the Falcon, during the seven hours since they had first met on the veranda, had convinced her of his impenetrable depth.

An admiration that bordered on fear defined her attitude toward him. Fear because she could not guess his thoughts. Nor fathom the significance of what he said.

It would have been unnatural if Lady Miriam had not been aroused to a measure of admiration for the Falcon. She was woman enough, despite her self-mastery, to react to a superior will.

Nor was Lady Miriam deluding herself to the point of careless self-assurance.

The fearful thought came to her that the Falcon was toying with her—had been deliberately pulling her leg when he accepted the invitation to escort her in the coupe.

She fought against gathering suspicion—dismissed it as a

product of her state of nerves.

Moreover, Lady Miriam *wanted* to believe that the Falcon was not suspicious of her. She was not wholly clear upon the point—did not quite understand the sudden impulse that had caused her even vaguely to solicit his aid, during that brief discourse in the coupe.

The appearance of a waiter afforded an interlude. When that individual had departed with the order, the Falcon abandoned the topic that had threatened to imperil them.

"Have you heard anything further from Mrs. Haldane—about the major?" he inquired.

The tone implied no more than casual interest. Lady Miriam answered easily.

"I haven't heard from Mrs. Haldane," she said evenly, then added: "I assume Major Haldane must have returned."

He peered across, in the uncertain light, at the cold, unmoved face of the woman when she said that. There was a momentary surge of revulsion in the feelings she aroused in him. Then he found himself wondering, on *her* behalf, what other reply he could have expected.

When she sensed his disturbing scrutiny, she determined upon a bold shift.

"We are forgetting why I came down here especially to be with you, Mr. Gate," she said.

"The bag? You haven't investigated to make sure it still contains your rings."

She was somewhat taken back by that. It forced her to open the bag. But even while she was engaged in restoring the rings to her fingers, she pressed her point.

"Apart from the bag, and my deep thanks to you, it's the recital of your miraculous escape from the highwaymen I'm waiting to hear," she insisted.

"Not in the least a miracle," he said. "Someone just came

along in a car and frightened the big, bad men away."

"And *you* had no part in it?"

"Astonishing presence of mind, you might say. I remembered to pick up your bag when the terrible highwayman abandoned it."

"You refuse to paint yourself a hero?"

"There would have been no point in heroism, since you were no longer at hand to witness it."

She was uncertain how to meet that. It occurred to her that the subject she had injected was hardly less unfortunate than the one from which she had shied.

The Falcon sat for a moment, amused by her perplexed silence. Then he said:

"It was fortunate, don't you think, in view of the way things have turned out, that I made no attempt to use the revolver you proffered me?"

"You could have *finished* him!"

"*Him?*"

She recoiled when his sharp query so promptly checked her impetuous suggestion. But she made a brave attempt.

"The highwayman who came to our car, I mean," she explained. "They don't deserve to get away free, do they?"

The waiter appeared at their table to serve them. The Falcon disregarded the remark.

Instead, he found himself musing again upon two questions that had occurred to him during those moments of suspense on the dark road.

Why had Lady Miriam offered him her gun after assuring herself that he was unarmed? Why had Stokey Mullins so carelessly exposed himself when he approached her side of the coupe?

He realized that a shot would have made Stokey's brandished revolver ineffective—defeated the holdup plan.

Answers to both questions now wedged themselves into the Falcon's mind: Lady Miriam had been *expressly charged* with making sure that he was unarmed; she had offered him her revolver *because she wanted Stokey Mullins rubbed out!*

As that theoretical answer pounded suddenly in the Falcon's brain, the waiter turned from his task and withdrew from the booth.

The Falcon leaned forward on the table. His ferreting gaze bored into the dark eyes so close to him.

The woman instantly caught the change in his manner. She did not need to wait for the electric tenseness of his voice.

"Lady Miriam, why did you offer me your gun before we started on that trip?" he asked.

She saw no escape. She quailed before that expressionless countenance.

She was no match for the overwhelming personality of this stranger. All of her long training in self-possession crumbled into an agony of nausea.

But he sat across from her—staring—waiting. The time had slipped by when she could offer an inconsequent, disarming answer.

The Falcon had trapped her, as he had *intended* to trap her.

Lady Miriam, her intuition alive, was aware both of his intention and of his knowledge that he had succeeded.

Forced to the defense, however, she had recourse to her own mettle. She leaned forward, bringing their faces even closer.

"You aren't really just a gentleman of leisure making merely a casual visit to Marmont Manor, are you?" she asked.

Her eyes were wide, serious. She left no suspicion that the question was an impertinence.

If she expected to discover evidence of his reaction, she was disappointed. The steel-hued eyes, almost totally invisible in their narrow grooves, peered at her unmoved.

There was no sign that the Falcon resented the question, nor even that his interest was aroused.

When Lady Miriam had waited long, slowly measured seconds, flushing in embarrassment, his thin lips moved just enough for his words to reach her.

"You aren't really Lady Miriam Wadringham, are you?" he asked quietly.

She studied his inscrutable countenance before she responded, but soon abandoned the futile effort.

"If you knew the complete answer to that question," she said, "I'm sure you would be conservative in your conclusions."

The Falcon leaned back, toying with the puzzle in her ambiguous reply. Before he glanced up, he sensed an approach at the open side of the booth.

A man in smartly tailored dinner clothes stood within a foot of the table. His rounded face, passably handsome, was slightly flushed. The pink was especially noticeable below the heavy blond hair.

Even in the uncertain light, the Falcon recognized him as the man who had been identified as Cart at the door of his room less than an hour earlier.

Lady Miriam had not yet discovered the newcomer. The latter announced himself, looking arrogantly down at the Falcon.

"Sorry to break in on this," he said, "but Lady Miriam was to have joined *me* in the supper-room."

The tone obviously intended an affront. The cocksure

bearing matched it.

The Falcon rose in his place with easy grace. He bowed slightly with a touch of affected politeness.

But the words came hard-cut, even if softly spoken.

"I convinced Lady Miriam she would find it more interesting here," he said.

"I can *believe* that," the other man responded. "Particularly as I overheard Lady Miriam's last remark to you. This clandestine environment seems *suited* for the ignition of a tender spark."

Lady Miriam, looking up at the intruder through alarmed eyes, uttered a single word of reproach.

"*Please!*" she exclaimed.

With a motion so deft that it had attracted no attention, the Falcon had edged aside, clear of the corner of the table. It brought him alongside, facing the newcomer's profile.

"In my presence," the Falcon said, "irrespective of the circumstances, a cad apologizes for a remark like that."

The situation appeared obvious to the Falcon. The intruder's intention was to pick a quarrel.

The Falcon chose deliberately to promote the plan. He gave no time to weighing the probability that, even in her exclaimed remonstrance, Lady Miriam was merely acting a part.

A sneer curled about the wide mouth of the newcomer. His left arm drew up quickly. By the process, the hard elbow would have caught the Falcon sharply under the chin.

But the head did not remain there for the upraised elbow. Instead, the astonished assailant found sinewy fingers closed in a steel grasp around his left wrist. He half-pivoted and began a swing with his free right arm but the intention froze when agonizing pains streaked from the clamped

wrist, now wrenched upward behind his back.

Lady Miriam stood up, galvanized by the spectacle.

The Falcon appeared scarcely engaged in the enterprise, yet his adversary writhed in a torturing strain and his breath came fast. He could not command the muscles of his free arm.

The two men were about of even height, although the Falcon, in his form-fitting apparel, seemed the slighter. But the hardened, elastic muscles had lost none of their Cambridge development.

"Well?" the captive breathed thickly when the tableau had become static.

The Falcon added a wrench to the wrist and the other stifled a groan.

Looking across his helpless prisoner's shoulder, the Falcon saw a thick form bearing down upon them. The polished barrel of a revolver glistened in the dim light.

The Falcon swerved the position of the man he held, screening himself, pushing out free of the partition of the cramped booth.

A deafening explosion resounded in the narrow room. The oncoming man dropped his revolver and grabbed at the hand that had held it.

There was only an instant for the Falcon to discover the sudden gush of blood that streamed from the stricken hand. Then the narrow room was plunged into darkness.

Across the room, from another booth, a woman's scream pierced the tense blackness of the place. Shouts rose from the bar. There was a rush of feet.

The Falcon swung the man he held and sent him hurtling across the floor against an opposite table.

At the same moment a shadowy hulk brushed near. There was a crackling impact of flesh against flesh. A body

thumped to the floor, almost at the Falcon's feet.

"Chief!"

It was no more than a husky whisper.

"Right, old timer," the Falcon said softly, stepping across the fallen body.

"I got a way out," the Sarge whispered when the two stood shoulder to shoulder in the dark.

They moved along, without thought of Lady Miriam. No sound had come from her in the booth.

They felt their way quickly. There was a scattered scrambling of people about them.

The Sarge directed the course. They ascended the four low steps into the card-room, which also was in darkness.

Avoiding the dimly lighted loge beyond the second set of steps, the two men hugged the shadows along the opposite wall until they reached the open french doors. No more than wraiths against the thick night, they stepped out to the rock-paved court.

The small shelf set high above the lighted village below came to an abrupt end where it met the structure of the veranda. But a masonry ledge just wide enough for a foothold extended beyond the veranda foundation.

In single file, the two men moved lithely along the ledge, traversing it the full length of the veranda and around the closed end. It brought them to a narrow garden space set among the rocks beyond the outer side of the Manor.

They were able now to follow the grounds past the length of the Manor's right wing and emerge in the shadows at the outskirts of the esplanade.

Avoiding the lighted area, they trailed past the long line of parked automobiles, remaining in the shadows until they were opposite the end of their own wing of the Manor.

They made use of the iron stairway, ascending it to the

balcony of their own floor. The corridor stretched ahead, deserted in its vague yellow light. A moment later they were behind the door of their own suite.

Not a word had been uttered between them during that tense flight. But when they stood again in the silence of their own living-room, the Falcon spoke.

"Fine work, old timer," he said.

"Wasn't nothin'."

"I take it you managed the lights."

"Yeh, chief. When that bird Cart busted in on you, I figured you'd handle *him* okay, but I was waitin'."

"For the reinforcements, eh?"

"Sure. Then th' other egg, who Cart left behind, started movin' in."

"Koster, probably."

"Guess so, chief. A new one to me. I thought we might need a getaway. So I doused th' lights first in th' card-room. Spotted th' buttons in both rooms before you came in."

"I never worry about those details when you're around, old boy."

The Sarge grinned broadly at the tribute.

"I wasn't lookin' for gun play," he confessed, "but I was watchin'. When that dumb cluck pulled his gat I let him have it and doused th' lights in th' tap-room."

"When that superlative marksmanship of your steady right hand begins to waver, some of our adversaries of the future are likely to suffer."

"Yeh? How, chief?"

The Falcon snickered.

"Don't pretend, you old son-of-a-gun, that that big heart in your chest didn't limit Koster's immediate damage to his offending right hand."

"Oh, that!" the Sarge chuckled. "It was plenty target, chief."

"I noticed," the Falcon agreed.

He glanced at his watch. The hands showed barely past eleven. Hardly half an hour since he had met Lady Miriam in the loge. The final scene in the tap-room and the deftly executed escape had occupied only seconds.

The Falcon squinted at the Sarge, an amused grin showing faintly at the corners of his thin mouth.

"If you aren't completely fatigued by the evening's exercise, old timer," he said, "I think it's time we examined the contents of that mysterious packet that has so thoroughly disrupted our plans for a quiet week-end."

For answer, besides a huge smile that spread across his face, the Sarge reached into an inner pocket and drew forth the packet.

"I'd say that by this time, chief, it *belongs* to you."

CHAPTER IX

CALL FOR HELP

OUTSPREAD ON THE TABLE LAY THE CONTENTS OF THE package.

The Sarge was the first to express his reaction. Curiously, it was one of disappointment he made no effort to conceal.

"That don't tell us nothin', does it, chief?" he complained.

The Falcon responded without looking up, carelessly fingering the uniformly folded, engraved certificates.

"Nothing whatsoever, old timer, if you choose to overlook the obvious fact that these ten pieces of paper are the negotiable equivalent of one hundred thousand dollars in American money."

The Sarge found it difficult to shake off his disappointment. He hitched his chair back a bit from the table and sank to a sprawled position.

"Sure, I know each one is a ten-grand government bond," he acknowledged bitterly, "but that ain't what we was hopin' to find."

"Not exactly a poor return for the weight you were required to tote around with you since four o'clock."

The big fellow scowled boyishly, then succumbed to a smile.

"I ain't sayin' we should sneeze at a hundred grand," he compromised, "but it don't throw no openin' our way."

The Falcon grinned.

"There is hardly need of a diagram or code directing us

to the hidden treasure when the treasure itself is dropped into our laps."

The Sarge straightened and looked at his chief through eyes that sparkled confidently.

"I got a hunch," he challenged, "that you'd trade that stuff for somethin' that woulda give us a line on what's been goin' on between this Lady Miriam and th' Haldanes."

"On the contrary, old man, suppose we first take into account just what information this *does* unfold for us."

"Okay, chief."

"First, it removes the last thread of suspicion that the package was intended as a gift to *me*."

"I guess what Lady Miriam and her friends been tryin' to do to you wiped that out long ago."

"And we learn that it was the value of the package alone, and not the fear of incriminating disclosure, that prompted the somewhat futile efforts to regain possession of it."

"Maybe that's worth somethin'," the Sarge conceded, unconvinced.

"These being bearer bonds," the Falcon continued, "they show no evidence of former ownership. If it mattered, of course, the numbers would enable a check."

"Yeh, we could start that, I guess."

"Not without undesirable reactions, possibly. The point I'm making is that whoever wrapped up these bonds and directed their delivery on the veranda this afternoon obviously had no reason to be concerned that ownership might be traced through the numbers."

"Stolen, you think, chief?"

"Always a reasonable assumption, old timer, although not necessarily accurate. And theft of the bonds does not exactly fit in with my theory."

The Sarge displayed animation.

"Oh! You got a *hunch* about it?"

"We must remember that our young friend Slim obviously was engaged to deliver the package to a man he did not know. Then we discover the same Slim identified with the interests rather tirelessly occupied in an effort to recover it."

"Sure, chief! Remember, Cart said somethin' to Slug about Slim messin' up th' whole business this afternoon."

"I considered that enlightening at the time, old man, and yet it would be possible to jump at an erroneous conclusion."

"I was only thinkin'," the Sarge hastened to amplify, "that there's still somebody else in th' setup. Somebody Slim didn't know."

"Beyond doubt, somebody Slim didn't know, but not necessarily somebody else. That is exactly the dangerous conclusion I had in mind."

"But, chief, how—"

"We must not overlook the possibility that Slim did not know your friend Cart."

"Cripes! I guess I wasn't dopin' it so close. It *coulda* been like that."

"I mention it only as a caution against hasty assumption," the Falcon explained, grinning. "We shall be able to go a step toward positive elimination when we learn who occupies room B-9."

"Yeh, chief?"

"Naturally, the gentleman who was expected to join Lady Miriam in the bridge game had not yet taken the risk of being observed by the Haldanes about the Manor."

"That's right, sure."

"Which brings us to a curious circumstance. Didn't you think it odd that the expected guest did not telephone a

message until after the train on which he was scheduled to arrive was already in the Marmont station?"

"Hell, yes! A guy would let folks know earlier, if he wasn't comin', wouldn't he?"

"Unless, for instance, he really did arrive on the train and telephoned the Manor from the station."

The Sarge's blue eyes widened as the Falcon bared that climax of his intricate deduction.

"I'll ask you, old man," the Falcon added, "to continue as custodian of these vagabond certificates, now that their value, at least, is no longer a secret."

As the Sarge leaned forward to gather up the bonds, the Falcon turned his attention to the paper in which they had been wrapped.

He spread it out smoothly, then picked it up, examining it closely against the light.

It appeared to be a plain sheet of wrapping paper, of a pale pink tint, such as might be found in a drug store. At first glance the paper seemed to be without mark or blemish on either side but closer scrutiny uncovered a smudged, faded area.

"Something—an address, apparently—has been erased from this paper," the Falcon muttered. "The faint marks of old folds clearly indicate that it was used for an earlier wrapping."

While the Sarge waited, interested, the Falcon slipped away to another room of the suite, returning almost instantly with a small magnifying lens. He bent over the table and studied the rubbed spot on the paper through the glass.

"Most of the writing has been successfully erased," the Falcon announced, "but there is vague evidence of three lines of writing. Impressions of the bottom line are fairly revealed by the lens."

"Any help, chief?"

"Just possibly. Apparently something was delivered in this paper before it was used as a wrapping for these bonds. The name and street number are not decipherable from the few impressions that may be observed. But the last line obviously was *Asbury Park, New Jersey*. It is at once apparent, of course, that this is only part of the original wrapping paper, since one edge reveals an irregular tear."

"Asbury Park, hunh? Think that could give us a lead, chief?"

"It offers an interesting speculation. Results would depend upon how much we should be able to learn through preliminary inquiry."

"Yeh?"

"First, for instance, to establish how long in advance the plan was made for Mrs. Haldane's bridge game on the veranda this afternoon."

"Gettin' kinda deep for me, chief," the Sarge chuckled.

"The next step would be to ascertain if, after the plan was made, either of the Haldanes or Lady Miriam telephoned from Marmont Manor to any number in Asbury Park."

"That *would* give us a finger, wouldn't it?"

"We must assume that whoever sent the package of bonds to the Manor started Slim on the way before, for some reason yet to be learned, Lady Miriam's expected guest changed his mind about taking part in the bridge game."

"Hey, chief! If it's like that, maybe Slim and this cluck Cart *never* met before. Guess it would take pretty near three hours to get up here from Asbury Park."

The Falcon squinted with tolerant amusement as his big associate swung himself energetically into the process of deduction.

"A fascinating speculation, at any rate," he mused. "Being only a speculation, it will be well to avoid conclusions."

The huge face of the Sarge sobered instantly when that characteristic observation by the Falcon checked his racing thoughts.

"Okay, chief," the big fellow said, grinning guiltily. "I'll slow up."

"Understand, old timer, I'm not saying this theory is to be discarded. I think this bit of wrapping paper is worth preserving for future reference."

The Falcon was in the act of folding the paper when the sharp ringing of the room-telephone broke upon them.

Both men rose, looking uncertainly across at the instrument. Neither moved until the ringing was repeated. Then the Falcon crossed to the instrument and picked it up.

There was no reason to doubt the identity of the voice that reached him in response to his softly spoken "hello."

Lady Miriam rushed at once into a rapid, nervous speech. But her voice was low, guarded—the words just barely distinguishable.

"Please bear with me, Mr. Gate, for my repeated annoyance, but I *must* impose upon you. There is something I *must* tell you and my situation is difficult. It is a matter that concerns—"

The words broke off abruptly. There was just a split-second of silence. Then a shrill, curdling woman's scream pierced over the wire against the Falcon's ear-drum.

A sharp click at the other end of the wire cut short the terrified cry.

Even the Sarge caught the startling pitch of the scream in that instant when the Falcon moved the deafening receiver away from his ear.

The Falcon replaced the instrument. There was a bare

instant of inaction as the two men faced each other.

Then the Falcon's energy asserted itself.

"Old man, you've probably guessed that was Lady Miriam," he said, speaking quickly, yet without trace of agitation. "A hint that she was in difficulty, then that scream."

"I heard it, chief."

"It may be genuine. It may be an antiquated ruse. In any circumstances, I want a look into the corridor outside our room without opening the door."

"How, chief?"

"I believe it can be managed. One window in your bedroom is no more than four feet from the railing of the balcony. With your help, I can make it. That will give me a view of the corridor from the dark, outside the french doors."

"And *me*, chief?"

"On guard inside this room, at the door. You'll know what to do."

The Falcon sprang to the wall switch as he spoke. A moment later the two men moved from the darkened living-room, threading their way in the vague light admitted through the windows.

Finding a bare toe-hold in the rough masonry below the sill of the window, the Falcon clung to his perilous position. The wall of the building alongside the balcony structure was in deep shadow.

The Sarge pushed one huge leg through the window and straddled the sill, locking himself with the leg inside. In his massive arms he took over the suspended weight of the Falcon.

The latter swung his right foot widely out against the wall. The searching toe found the balcony rail—the foot

moved to establish a solid contact.

The Falcon's outstretched right hand groped along the side of the wall—groped until the sensitive fingers caught against the slightly extended moulding of the balcony.

Bracing his weight against the vague foot-hold and clinging with only the fingertips of the one hand, the Falcon paused in a moment of final preparation.

"Okay, Sarge," he barely breathed.

The lithe, flexible body flashed in an arc that barely drew away from the wall in its sweep.

It was the combined momentum of the Falcon's own spring and the carefully directed push by the Sarge. The Falcon needed only an instant to gain his equilibrium, upright on the rail. He stepped down noiselessly to the floor of the balcony.

Immediately a shadow even deeper than that which enveloped the balcony confronted him. It was a broad, wraith-like hulk that seemed to have risen from the floor.

It was superlative instinct that enabled the Falcon to weave aside to escape that first massive swing when he had just barely alighted from the rail.

A moment later he danced beyond a lunge, then plunged coolly forward for his own attack upon his phantom assailant.

There was a crackling impact when his hard-driven fist found a mark, but there was no opportunity to select a precise target in the dark.

The Falcon's adversary was bent upon closing in, relying upon his bulk in the perilous struggle on the small landing. The space was cramped between the balcony rail and the iron structure of the spiral stairway.

Forced to step in from the rail to avoid a lunge that could have toppled both men to the ground, the Falcon found

himself caught half around the waist from one side.

The heavy arm that was under his own reach held him with a pressure that made an attempt at pivoting a hazard. In this position the Falcon found it impossible to deliver a blow.

Delayed decision would have been fatal. But the powerful antagonist had no reason to anticipate the strategy of a lightning mind.

The Falcon dropped forward at full length, using a foot-stroke to unbalance his opponent. Unprepared, as well as surprised, the opponent went down also.

The Falcon took his fall cautiously, having both hands free to protect himself. But the surprise worked against the other man. His head crashed against a hard edge of the iron steps.

The Falcon wriggled free from the stunned man's grasp. He rose. In the dark, to which his eyes had now become accustomed, he waited.

The other man got up, shaking off his momentary daze. The Falcon gave him no quarter. He was now in his own sphere, directing hammer-driven blows.

A moment the befogged contender poised unsteadily against the low rail. A crashing fist caught the point of his tremoring jaw.

For an instant he seemed balancing uncertainly. Then the Falcon saw the vague hulk topple over—lose itself in the pitch-black void beneath the silent balcony.

CHAPTER X

FLIGHT

THE FALCON MOVED CAUTIOUSLY TO A SHADOWED ANGLE AT one side of the balcony doors. He peered through into the long, indistinctly lighted corridor.

The struggle in the dark had occupied less than a minute. The exertion had exacted little from the Falcon. He stood there calmly, collected.

No sound had come from below after his adversary had plunged over the rail. Behind him the night was still, the Manor grounds bathed in shadow.

The corridor was deserted, silent. Yet the Falcon waited —patient—expectant.

A form emerged from a door some distance away. The Falcon calculated the number, counting from the nearby door of his own suite. He satisfied himself that the man, hardly more than a silhouette, had come from B-10—Lady Miriam's room.

The man peered cautiously along the corridor, first in one direction, then in the other. For a moment or two he hesitated uncertainly, listening.

Then he stepped back to the door from which he had emerged but he did not pass beyond the Falcon's view. The Falcon saw him tap on the door, then step away from it.

Almost immediately two other figures appeared. An instant later the three came along swiftly, nervously—approaching the balcony.

When they had covered half the distance, the Falcon's thin lips tightened. Recognition became a certainty.

Lady Miriam, wearing a light coat over the gown in which he had seen her earlier, was in the middle. She carried a small leather traveling bag.

Cart, still in his dinner jacket, was at her left. At the other side of the young woman was the thick figure of Stokey Mullins, whom the Falcon had last seen, less than three hours earlier, lying prone in the road at the scene of the miscarried holdup.

Mullins carried an ordinary suit-case. Cart displayed no burden.

The Falcon was at the point of retreating, with the intention of seeking advantageous refuge on the spiral flight that ascended to the balcony above, when the three oncomers halted.

They were directly opposite the door of his own rooms, not a dozen feet from where he stood.

There was a brief pantomime. No word was spoken. Yet it was plain that Mullins was issuing a command to Lady Miriam. He did it with a jerk of one thumb.

Even in that tensely anxious moment, the Falcon found himself wondering why it should be Mullins, not Cart, in the role of command.

Mullins had set down his suit-case and he moved beside Cart. Lady Miriam dropped her bag lightly to the carpeted floor. She stepped toward the door, her right hand upraised.

Watching intently, guessing the plan that was being unfolded, the Falcon saw that the woman's face wore its usual calm, except for strained lines at the corners of her narrow mouth. Her dark eyes were hard.

He was half impressed that she was acting under protest, whether through fear or unwillingness to fall in with plans

evidently determined in advance.

Then the Falcon's narrowed eyes made a discovery. It brought the faintest hint of a grim smile to the corners of his mouth.

The door at which he stared fixedly—the door behind which he expected the Sarge to be posted, ready for any emergency—*lacked a full inch of being closed!*

That startling fact had not yet impressed itself upon the two men. They were standing somewhat back from the door.

But Lady Miriam, her knuckles almost against the panel, made the discovery. Her upraised hand halted, poised in uncertainty. It seemed to the Falcon that she shrank back, without actually moving her body.

There was one instant of throbbing, nerve-straining tension. Then the door was drawn back swiftly until it stood wide open.

The huge figure of the Sarge was framed in the opening, the room behind him dark.

His right hand clutched his immense service revolver—inseparable relic of days when he had worn a shield and won his title.

The vast face of the Sarge was wreathed in a smile. His teeth showed between his thick lips, drawn back. His blue eyes shone clear—sparkled.

It might have been taken for a friendly, kindly countenance. But the Falcon knew the characteristic: the Sarge always smiled when he waded into danger.

"All hands high in the air, folks!"

The command issued as scarcely more than a chuckled whisper from the thick lips of the Sarge. The huge gun pointed unwaveringly, pressed against one hip.

If the Sarge expected an argument he was disappointed.

His unnerving command met complaisant acquiescence.

Protest was limited to scowls on the faces of the two men. Only Lady Miriam looked on calmly, her small hands even with her shoulders.

The Falcon slipped through the doors into the light of the corridor. His step was soft.

The Sarge showed no surprise. His smiling eyes did not wander from the spellbound faces in front of him.

The three astonished wayfarers, their backs toward the balcony doors, had no hint of the Falcon's presence until he spoke.

"Splendid, old timer," he said quietly.

Lady Miriam was the first to turn. But there was no change of expression in her wide eyes when they discovered him.

Cart and Mullins turned more slowly, their hands remaining in the air. But their mouths drooped as the Falcon peered into their crestfallen countenances.

The Sarge stepped quickly out from the door. His tactics were smoothly expert. He found Cart unarmed but he succeeded in removing an automatic from Mullins.

"Looks like I'm kinda busy tonight collectin' toys from this palooka," the Sarge said thickly to the Falcon as he pocketed the confiscated gun.

The remark, breaking the spell, had the effect of restoring a measure of courage to the cornered prowlers.

"Well, what is all this supposed to be leading up to?" Cart demanded, smirking toward the Falcon.

The latter nodded perversely in the direction of the Sarge. It was a galling gesture.

"It's your question, punk," the Sarge said, accepting the cue, "so make up your own answer. Believe you was intendin' to call on us. Seems to be a kinda habit you and your

friends got tonight."

"What are you getting at? We were merely walking along the corridor when you broke out on us. I'll call the house detective."

The Sarge chuckled broadly.

"Unless I'm s'posed to laugh out loud at you, don't make no more dumb cracks like that," he said. "You'd only be savin' me th' trouble."

Lady Miriam acted on an impetuous decision, moved, it seemed to the Falcon, by desperation.

She deliberately lowered her hands and picked up her traveling bag. She had taken two anxious steps toward the balcony before she paused.

"May I go?" she asked, her tone without appeal. She faced the Falcon with her question, emboldened to ignore the Sarge and his revolver.

The Falcon hunched one shoulder to indicate the Sarge. Lady Miriam, mastering her annoyance, turned to face the big fellow.

But she did not repeat her question; merely expressed her impatient query in her blazing dark eyes.

The Sarge shrugged extravagantly, chuckling.

"Well, it ain't *my* business if you're jumpin' your bill by hoppin' down th' back way," he said to her.

Lady Miriam chose to accept that as her release. Without a word, without glancing again at any of the men, she resumed her way toward the balcony.

The Sarge, assured by his own effort that the two trapped men were not armed, pocketed his revolver. The situation had gone beyond a stage where he could have been induced to make use of it.

The gesture brought an immediate response from Cart. Lady Miriam had not yet reached the balcony opening.

"If this ridiculous circus stunt has reached its end, we'll all be going," he said.

Both Cart and Mullins had lowered their arms. The Falcon had moved along lightly to the exit, waiting for Lady Miriam to pass him.

Cart, despite the air of assurance he had put into his boast, seemed awaiting consent. Mullins and he stood close beside each other, edging away uncertainly.

The Sarge planted himself solidly in front of the men.

"Maybe it'll be better to leave it to me," he said, "to say when you two start movin'."

They halted, staring at him bitterly, but neither appeared disposed to challenge him.

The Falcon squinted at Lady Miriam. His voice arrested her progress, when she was almost beside him, although he addressed the Sarge.

"Perhaps, old man," he drolled, "we should not deprive the lady of her escorts at this late hour."

Lady Miriam caught her breath. Her mouth tightened. She knew the Falcon had pitilessly forced the choice upon her own shoulders.

She could not read his face, but she felt those hidden eyes ferreting into her own, demanding her verdict. Her self-control was ebbing and she was sure he knew it.

"I'd rather manage *without* them, if you don't mind," she said.

She had spoken softly. Her voice had not broken.

Both Cart and Mullins shuffled forward when they caught her amazing confession but they found the huge form of the Sarge an unrelenting barrier.

Lady Miriam passed through to the dark balcony. She felt her way cautiously, searching for the iron stairway.

She sensed the Falcon's soft tread behind her—turned. He

was close, silhouetted against the light of the open doors.

She spoke to him hurriedly, barely above a whisper.

"You've done me a magnificent service, really," she said. "When you learn what has just happened in my room, you'll understand. I'm really anxious to have you understand."

She paused as if she expected a question, but when he remained silent, she added:

"I wish I could have met you under circumstances less unfavorable to me. I rather hope we'll meet again—Mr. Gate—yet, I don't know *why* I hope it."

Only the deep shadow hid her chagrin when he stood there unresponsive, sphinx-like.

She turned hurriedly and groped her way down the spiral steps.

Only when he saw her shadowy figure disappearing in the direction of the parking space did the Falcon follow down the steps, descending slowly, his thoughts busy with her enigmatic admissions.

He waited in the dark until he heard the starting of her motor. Her eagerness to escape found expression in a burst of noisy speed. Her car flashed beyond view before she shifted gears.

The same signal, jarring into the still night, must have reached the keen ears of the Sarge. Glancing up, the Falcon saw two forms emerge upon the balcony at the second level. He slipped quietly around the corner of the building.

The two men half raced across the soft ground, avoiding the light from the esplanade. There was only brief delay before another car, lights suddenly set ablaze, backed out of the parked line and shot viciously away in the wake of Lady Miriam's coupe.

The Falcon, climbing back, found the Sarge waiting just

inside the corridor. A vague grin played from the corners of the Falcon's eyes. But the Sarge looked at his chief soberly. Almost solemnly they returned to their quarters.

The Sarge studied his chief as the latter paced the room, finally dropping into the chair he had abandoned at the ringing of the telephone.

"It was a tough break, chief," the Sarge muttered.

"Tough?"

"Yeh. I wanted a reason to blot out them clucks. I kinda thought it might come after you went out behind th' girl."

The Falcon snickered.

"They declined to give you trouble, I take it."

"Yeh. Waited like a couple cooked eggs."

"The trouble with you, old timer, is that there is nothing about you that is deceptive. No two men, reasonably rational, would consider launching an argument with you. You may have noticed that earlier this evening Cart alone was disposed to manifest a wholesome contempt for me."

"Yeh, but he got out o' that notion in a hurry. Anyway, I hated to let 'em slip out."

"Don't let that thought annoy you, old man. We haven't lost them."

"No?"

"You don't suppose they will neglect us at a sacrifice of that neat bundle of bonds."

"Oh! And th' woman, chief! How about her?"

"I have a hint of the reason for her flight."

"Did she spill somethin', chief?"

"Only that something happened in her room. Her telephone call a little while ago may have been genuine, but too late."

"Cripes! What coulda happened?"

The Falcon glanced at his watch. He got up. He grinned drily.

"As a courtesy to the worthy but sadly hampered profession you once followed so capably, old timer, I suggest we leave at least that morsel to the police of this peaceful little village."

"Peaceful? Cripes!"

CHAPTER XI

A CROWDED POLICE DOCKET

NOTHING MORE THAN A BELATED WAVE OF SUMMER SULTRIness had caused the Falcon and the Sarge, along with countless thousands, to abandon Manhattan for a mid-September week-end in the open. Having no desire to wedge into the heavier traffic bound for the nearby beach resorts, the Falcon had chosen to accept the advertised hospitality of Marmont Manor.

For one thing, the drive was short. Just returned from an invigorating retreat to the Maine woods, the two companions were alike indisposed to draw far away from the customary scene of their exacting activities—New York.

The reader who has had an opportunity for earlier acquaintance with the Falcon was at once aware, of course, that the name *Jeffries Gate* had been employed by him merely as an expedient for the purpose of his brief stay at Marmont Manor. Such reader will remember that the Falcon studiously restricted his identity as Malcom J. Wingate to the highly reputed Copley-Vendome Hotel, where he was served with the courtesy due a respected resident and billed regularly for his sumptuous ninth-floor quarters that commanded an elaborate vista of lower Central Park and Columbus Circle.

To the police and newspaper-reading populace of both London and New York, the wholly obscure American-born Malcolm J. Wingate, during hardly more than four

years out of Cambridge, had assumed gargantuan stature as the Falcon.

He himself had adopted the symbolic title, upon emerging into a self-directed career of crossing swords with crime. He employed it as a signature for occasional terse communications which invariably gained spectacular prominence in the metropolitan press—first in London and subsequently in New York.

That his intensely dynamic enterprise had stamped him, in police and press records, as the elusive, phantom master genius of the underworld, sometimes fantastically reputed to have countless minions engaged in diabolical schemes of his own invention, caused the Falcon no regret for his choice of vocation. Nor did he weigh the injustice of the universal mind merely because often he stood charged with monstrous crimes actually committed by malefactors he thwarted or destroyed.

The Falcon went by choice into a field that offered keen tilts for his sharp wits, adventure that he found satisfying, contest for his superbly trained body. If he did not permit society to restrict his methods, at any rate society benefited from his exploits, and lost nothing it had not already lost.

In contrast, the Sarge had remained Steve Hardy, bluffly holding on at all times to the name under which he had given fourteen years of meritorious but hampered service to the recognized ranks of law enforcement.

His devoted compact with the Falcon was their own confidence. His former police associates, holding him in undiminished regard, took it for granted that Steve Hardy had entered service as a private detective operative. He found police friendships useful, his knowledge of the underworld and nodding acquaintance with many of its hirelings an asset.

The absence of his oldtime shield did not make the Sarge less a "copper" at heart. He had been able to link himself with the Falcon, once he grasped his amazing philosophy and witnessed his fearless courage, because the larger ends served co-ordinated with his scruples. Such increment as fell their way in the course of their enterprise already had become underworld spoils.

As has already been gathered from this record, the situation in which the Falcon and the Sarge now found themselves involved in Marmont Manor had presented itself neither from their bidding nor by their own design. Yet either of them would have regarded it a breach of their self-imposed trust not to follow to the end the avenue that had opened to them.

The Saturday morning that was to have dawned upon a quiet, relaxed Westchester village divulged instead a community wrought to the core by incidents of the preceding night.

The echo of those crowded happenings, focused down from Marmont Manor upon the gray domed building that faced the village plaza opposite the railroad station. The quaint, stuccoed structure housed, among other local governmental agencies, the Marmont Police Department.

In an office that looked out upon the landscaped plaza, Commissioner of Police Marcus Baldwin sat at an ancient rolltop desk. It was a full two hours earlier than his usual appearance for attention to his rarely onerous duties.

The loudly ticking clock on the wall over his desk pointed still something short of eight o'clock. But already for thirty minutes the troubled face of the commissioner had been bent over the sheaf of reports that stared up at him.

Curiously, of the items composing those disturbing re-

ports, Baldwin dismissed most easily the one dealing with the apparently accidental death of Major Eustace Porter Haldane.

Unfortunate, he meditated, that it also threw attention upon Marmont Manor, to increase the burden already weighted upon that eminently respectable community institution.

But, obviously, the major had shown too much faith in his aging, war-strained legs. The Manor, of course, would be in for censure, possibly heavy liability, because a faulty rail had given way, tumbling the major from the sharply descending path.

It was over the other items, however, that the Marmont police chief wrinkled his long, narrow brow and strained his mild gray eyes.

There was, to begin with, the unexplained shooting in the tap-room, made all the more baffling because the slightly wounded victim had disappeared from the village hospital later in the night.

Next in order, as the departmental memoranda lay arranged on the commissioner's desk, was the reported finding soon after daybreak of a man's body alongside the wall of the left wing of the Manor. A stranger still unidentified, and apparently not a guest of the Manor, the report cited.

Then came the most disturbing report of the batch—the discovery by a maid of a man's body in room B-10.

The commissioner scanned the meager details: Lady Miriam Wadringham, registered as a guest in that room, had disappeared. The man, young and slight, had not been identified but apparently was not a registered guest.

His pockets had been turned out and identifying marks had been torn from his clothing.

He obviously had been murdered by a crushing blow on

the skull, although a fresh gun-shot wound in one shoulder had been crudely bound.

Commissioner Baldwin, still hesitating over a half-formed decision to call on outside police aid to help him attack that staggering array of connected or disconnected crimes, closed his desk upon the sheaf of reports. He decided to delay an appeal that would bring a flood of unwelcome attention upon Marmont, at least until he could make his own preliminary investigation.

His thin jaws snapped tightly as he walked briskly out of his office to a polished car at the curb.

The commissioner's determined pursuit of that intention had at least something to do with the store of information with which the Sarge joined the Falcon in the living-room of their quarters soon after nine o'clock.

The two had breakfasted early. The Falcon had returned alone to their rooms almost an hour before the big fellow's reappearance.

"Those punks that beat it outa here last night finished Slim," the Sarge announced, when he had deposited himself in a deeply cushioned chair. The statement was without emotion.

The Falcon looked up from his examination of a Manhattan telephone directory.

"Slim, eh?"

"Yeh. *That's* what happened in Lady Miriam's room."

"So you were able to gather the details about that."

"Easy, chief. I got chinnin' with th' house dick. Found out him and me both know some of th' same boys travelin' down in Chelsea so he got to openin' up about his troubles. Guess he's got plenty to worry about so he was glad to pour some of it out."

"Finds himself somewhat on the spot, does he?"

"Kinda like. Says they ain't nothin' busted loose in this joint in a year, then it all comes at once. He just got away from th' town police commissioner when I bumped into him."

"Oh, the commissioner has taken hold of things, has he?"

"Seems like he don't know where to grab first. They don't know what happened down in th' tap-room. Didn't nobody notice me just before I took that pot shot and doused th' lights. When th' lights was turned back on, after somebody got nerve enough to do it, Lady Miriam, I guess, was outa th' place. Anyway, they ain't got her mixed up in it."

"How about the others?"

"Cart told folks he was knocked down by somebody but didn't know what it was all about. Th' palooka I clipped in th' hand was Phillip Koster, accordin' to th' name they got at th' hospital."

"Hospital?"

"Yeh. He was bleedin' pretty bad so they got a ambulance, but he ducked away from th' hospital before mornin', and that leaves th' coppers up a tree."

"Did your detective friend know what if anything had been learned from Cart?"

"Th' dick didn't have his name, chief. No, he just picked himself up and th' cops believed he was just a outsider that got in th' way of a rumpus. They found Koster's gun on th' floor but it hadn't been fired and they didn't know whose gun it was. Guess, from th' way th' dick tells it, they was glad to keep it quiet for th' good of th' joint."

"Civic spirit, naturally, old timer."

"Sure," the Sarge agreed, chuckling. "But they're up in th' air about th' cluck you pushed off th' balcony."

"Was he identified?"

"No, chief, but I kinda figure it was Slug—th' egg we found in here last night."

"I suspected that vaguely during our brief exchange in the dark," the Falcon said. "That pretty well accounts for the entire party, I'd say. Cart and Mullins followed Lady Miriam, as we happen to know. They probably gathered up Koster from the hospital, once his wounds had been attended to. With Slug inadvertently tossed aside, that would leave only Slim, and you say *he* was found in Lady Miriam's room. This morning?"

"What was left of him, yeh. His dome was caved in pretty rough. 'Course, th' cops found where I winged him but seems he got that tied up somewhere before he came back here."

"Happen to get his name?"

"They left him clean, chief, and ripped all th' labels from his clothes."

"Unfortunate, that," the Falcon commented meditatively. "Slim was the link between the origin and destination of the bonds."

"Musta been a reason for wipin' him out."

"Obviously, old timer. I think we may safely draw upon our imagination. We already have reason to suspect that Slim did not know Cart. But apparently, after Slim made the mistake of delivering the package to me, he was induced, in one way or another, to enlist his services."

"Joinin' Mullins in that flukey holdup, you mean?"

"Precisely. The young man seemed fairly refined and spoke quite correctly when he accosted me on the veranda. I doubt that the vocation in which we encountered him was his usual line."

"Forced to it, hunh?"

"Threats, added to his own anxiety because of his costly

error, no doubt. Which provided Mullins with a double motive to remove him, when the enterprise ended in failure."

"You'd say it was Mullins blotted him out, chief?"

"Mullins presents an interesting enigma, old timer. Oddly, I thought, it was he, not Cart, who was ordering last night's final episode just outside our door. It was Mullins you intercepted in the corridor yesterday afternoon while I was with Lady Miriam."

"That's right, chief."

"I think you'll find that Mullins was the registered tenant of B-9. He undoubtedly occupies a disturbing relationship to Lady Miriam's life. The young woman really was insistent that I make use of her small automatic last night when Mullins came up to her coupe."

"Cripes! Wanted you to wipe him out!"

"It seemed obvious. Moreover, the man Mullins was rather a poor imitation of an automobile bandit. He made a crude attempt to roughen his speech."

"*Does* put a phony slant on things, don't it, chief?"

"Made all the more puzzling by the familiarity with which Slug referred to him in talking to Cart, if you remember."

"Sure! Called him Stokey."

"You've recorded it a little more specifically," the Falcon granted, grinning. "Slug, you may remember, was not enthusiastic about rescuing Mullins."

"It's a helluva tieup, chief, with Lady Miriam in th' middle of it."

"By the way, old timer," the Falcon queried, "didn't your detective friend happen to mention Major Haldane?"

The Sarge chuckled.

"Cripes, I *was* passin' up th' big item," he confessed

sheepishly. "That's because th' cops is doin' about th' same thing. They dope it that he fell off th' path and broke his neck. He was all busted up from th' rocks. He was identified last night and Mrs. Haldane was called over to th' undertaker's."

"Nothing about his sudden disappearance yesterday afternoon?"

"Seems not, chief."

"So that the police see no link between his death and these other incidents, eh?"

The Sarge rubbed his chin, smiling broadly.

"Guess they's too many things they don't know."

"Including what Mrs. Haldane could have told them, possibly?"

"You think, chief—"

The Sarge checked himself and left his exclamation unfinished.

The Falcon was silent for several moments. His eyes narrowed as he toyed with a compelling thought. He got up suddenly.

"This telephone directory," he confided, "has divulged an item we may find of interest. I observe that *Carthaven Social Counselors* are listed."

"Cripes, that's a lead, chief."

"But I think that, in the meantime, I'm rather obligated to call on Mrs. Haldane and convey my condolences."

CHAPTER XII

HINTED ENTANGLEMENTS

In contrast with the left wing of Marmont Manor, given over to single rooms and small suites, the right wing comprised more spacious apartments, most of them occupied by permanent guests. The Haldane apartment was in the latter wing, on the same floor-level as the Falcon's suite but on the opposite side of the esplanade.

It was not without misgivings, yet with a thought that nothing was to be lost, that the Falcon approached the door of the apartment. He realized that his call might be untimely, with the tragedy so freshly fallen upon the elderly woman, or that he might find Mrs. Haldane so surrounded as to preclude the interview he sought.

The door was opened, to his knock, by a tall young woman whose appearance caused the Falcon instantly to dismiss the thought that she could be a maid-servant. She received him with almost impatient haughtiness, marked by just a faint frown and a barely perceptible puckering of her round chin.

The Falcon, studying her aristocratic bearing in that first glance, judged her to be somewhat under thirty. She was dressed for the street and showed evidence of a careful toilet—an item of which the caller made note, with his characteristic preciseness, because it was not yet past mid-morning.

"I was wondering if I might talk with Mrs. Haldane," the Falcon said politely.

The young woman peered at him, a puzzled expression gathering in her gray eyes. Suddenly she smiled vaguely, as if she had found an answer to the question that troubled her.

"How stupid of me," she said. "You mean Mrs. Eustace Porter Haldane, of course."

"I was at fault, not to be more specific," the Falcon acknowledged.

He accepted the woman's tardy invitation to enter the small reception hall. But she offered no explanation of her enigmatic statement. Instead, she waited for him to speak.

"I am Mr. Jeffries Gate, a resident at the Manor," the Falcon said. "Mrs. Eustace Porter Haldane will recognize the name, I suspect, if you'll be kind enough."

The earlier frown returned as the woman caught the hinted rebuff. She managed to look at him along her somewhat pointed nose when she replied.

"Mrs. Haldane is in an upset state, but I'll tell her you're here, naturally, Mr. Gate," she said coldly.

She left him standing there, the intentional incivility adding to his puzzled amusement.

So there is another Mrs. Haldane, the Falcon reflected. Balancing in his mind that moment of disturbed delay with which the young woman had met his initial statement, the Falcon risked a half-guess.

"*She* could be a Mrs. Haldane herself," he mused; then sprang into his mind the added thought: "She found it annoying when she thought I might have been intending a call on *her*. I wonder why."

The woman's return interrupted his conjecture.

"Mrs. Haldane will see you in the living-room, Mr. Gate," she announced stiffly.

A short hall led to a spacious living-room, with wide

windows facing on the esplanade. The woman had merely gestured the direction. She did not accompany him but made her exit from the reception-room through another door.

The Falcon, entering the large room, found himself alone. Habit caused him to survey the quarters in a sweeping glance.

The furnishings were simple, reminiscent of his own suite, except for an odd piece or two which evidently the Haldanes had added to the hotel's limited equipment. The walls were adorned with three massive portraits in oil—stern visaged men in military regalia. The late major's ancestors, the Falcon decided.

There was a mustiness about the room, and a measure of disorder, as if it had not been aired or had recent attention from the hotel maid.

On a small end-table, beside the arm of a tapestried divan, the Falcon discovered a bluish cloth bag which he remembered Mrs. Haldane had had with her at the card-table the previous afternoon. It lay as if it had been dropped there carelessly—possibly immediately after Mrs. Haldane had come up from the veranda, the Falcon conjectured.

Walking closer, he discovered that the bag was, in fact, unsnapped, its metal-bound edges just slightly apart.

Occupying a place on the table beside the bag was a brass ash-tray containing the remains of several partly smoked cigarettes.

The Falcon's eyes narrowed as he contemplated the ash-tray. From beneath the scattered layer of ashes there peeped up at him the edges of several torn fragments of white card. He hardly needed to make a closer scrutiny to substantiate the suspicion that flashed into his mind.

Somehow, in that ash-tray in the Haldane living-room,

alongside Mrs. Haldane's bag, lay bits of the same card that had been torn into fragments in Lady Miriam's room the preceding afternoon.

The Falcon had not yet assimilated the first flush of that discovery when a footstep caused him to turn. Mrs. Haldane came into the room.

She looked at him through strained eyes but her voice did not waver, although the tone was softer than when he had heard it on the veranda.

"It's kind of you to come," she said. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Gate?"

For herself she took the end of the divan, beside the small table, with an alacrity that suggested that it was her accustomed place in the room.

"I had a fear my visit would be inopportune, yet I was unwilling to delay it," the Falcon told her, selecting a chair that faced the divan.

The woman's bearing amazed him. Sadness shrouded her eyes and veiled her usually loud voice, but it was obvious that the tragedy had not broken her. She had herself well in hand.

"I am glad you came," she insisted. "It seems entirely natural that you would, since you were one of the last to be with my dear husband."

Even under this shadow of grief, her aggressive, capable spirit caused her to supply an explanation that suited her, rather than await one. The Falcon accepted the help she afforded him.

"That was what prompted this visit," he said. "The unfortunate news seems impossible, remembering the major as he walked away from the card-table yesterday."

"You learned of it only this morning, Mr. Gate?"

"Less than an hour ago, Mrs. Haldane."

"I can understand that it must have been a shock to you."

"I heard only that he was found last night, where he must have fallen from the path."

She looked at him with a disturbingly steady gaze when she rejoined:

"Yes, last night. It was late when the police came to me—when they took me to the undertaking parlors."

"And it was an accident, Mrs. Haldane?"

Just the faintest surprise flashed into her sorrowful eyes when he asked that. But she did not resent the question.

"It could have been nothing else, Mr. Gate. He had a habit of coming up from the village by that path, in preference to using the elevator, except in inclement weather, of course."

"Oh! Then he had been away from the Manor and was returning. I hadn't understood."

She studied his expressionless face briefly before she responded. She leaned somewhat toward him, and her voice lowered.

"I feel it necessary to be frank with you, Mr. Gate," she said. "I haven't mentioned to the police that Major Haldane left the card game so abruptly and did not return. Since that could have had nothing to do with his falling through the broken rail of the path, I have preferred not to raise unfortunate conjecture. I hope you will see my point, and as you are one of the few who know about his being called from the veranda, I hope—"

"I hadn't thought of mentioning it, Mrs. Haldane," the Falcon interjected quickly, rescuing the woman.

"Thank you, Mr. Gate."

"Only you and I—and Lady Miriam Wadringham, of course—know about that irrelevant incident."

"Lady Miriam would have no occasion to speak of it,"

Mrs. Haldane hastened to assure him.

"Did Major Haldane leave the Manor immediately after being called to the telephone?" the Falcon asked, pretending only polite interest.

Instead of answering, Mrs. Haldane allowed her gaze to wander about the room.

"Pardon me," she said after a moment, "but I was looking to see if there were cigarettes in the room. The major never smoked them but lately I've fallen into an occasional habit."

Even as she spoke, she discovered her bag beside her.

"There will be some in here," she said. "Will you smoke, Mr. Gate?"

"I rarely smoke them, thanks," the Falcon declined.

But when she had fished a small case from the bag, he stood ready before her with a lighter. And while she accepted his courtesy, he mused over the salient facts Mrs. Haldane inadvertently had unfolded to him in evading his question.

He had reason now to believe that Major Haldane had not been the last occupant of that chair in Lady Miriam's room in which he had found the pieces of card. He knew that Mrs. Haldane had cigarettes in the bag she had with her on the veranda, although she had not smoked during the card game.

Moreover, he knew now that Mrs. Haldane *did* smoke cigarettes and a few seconds later he was given reason to attach more than ordinary significance to that discovery.

After barely more than a half dozen nervous, unpractical puffs, Mrs. Haldane put the cigarette aside on the ash-tray, obviously discarding it permanently, since she permitted it to fall among the ashes. She made no effort to stamp out the lighted end and it lay there smoldering.

The Falcon looked at it, fascinated. He remembered a

smoldering cigarette on the littered ash-tray in Lady Miriam's room. It also had been just slightly smoked.

The sight of those bits of card among the ashes on the tray, supplemented by the abandoned cigarette, forced a staggering conjecture into the Falcon's mind.

Could it be that Mrs. Haldane had been sitting in that cushioned chair in Lady Miriam's room, only seconds before he had seen Major Haldane's body stretched out starkly on the floor?

Was it Mrs. Haldane who had sat in that chair and torn up the card that had been delivered to the major? Had she unintentionally dropped some of the fragments and carried others away with her in her bag, to be transfered later to this ash-tray in her own living-room?

The possibilities of the episode of the preceding afternoon crowded hurriedly through his sharp mind.

The major, he calculated, had been gone from the veranda ten minutes when Mrs. Haldane went in search of him. She could not have been in time to observe and follow the major to the upper floor. He had gone up immediately after a brief delay in the telephone booth, according to the information gathered from a bellboy by the Sarge.

Could Mrs. Haldane have learned in some other way of the major's hurried journey to B-10?

Lady Miriam, the Falcon recalled, had not been more than thirty seconds behind Mrs. Haldane in leaving the veranda. If she went directly to her room, she necessarily would have encountered Mrs. Haldane if the latter had gone there also.

The Falcon estimated that he himself had lingered on the veranda alone perhaps fifteen minutes after Lady Miriam's departure. He had witnessed Lady Miriam's flight from the room to the one across the corridor and had found

the room occupied apparently only by the unconscious major.

But a cigarette still smoldered on the ash-tray and bits of the torn card were in the chair and beside it on the floor!

There had been a pause of silence after Mrs. Haldane had puffed briefly at her cigarette. The Falcon's question remained unanswered. The woman had sat still, glancing at the floor in front of her, as if bent momentarily under her grief.

It seemed apparent that Mrs. Haldane knew nothing of the other incidents of the preceding night—that she was unaware of Lady Miriam's hurried departure from the Manor and the discovery of a murder victim in her room.

That latter thought laid the basis upon which the Falcon framed his next approach. He peered narrowly at the bowed, drawn face and he watched searchingly for the effect of his words.

"Mrs. Haldane, may I assure you that you and I can afford to speak in utmost confidence about yesterday afternoon's episode?"

She raised her eyes slowly. Something in his low, solemn tone had arrested her peculiarly. She seemed forewarned of something ominous. Yet she made a feeble effort to ward it off.

"What is there more to be said about it?" she parried, weakly.

"About what *happened* in Lady Miriam's room, I mean," he said bluntly.

She looked at him in sudden crushed appeal, but her pleading was restricted to her tortured eyes. Her lips trembled, as if struggling to form words, but no sound issued from them.

The noisy closing of a door in the adjacent hall jarred

upon the tense stillness of the room. Immediately a man's deep voice was heard.

The interruption had the effect of resurrecting Mrs. Haldane from her distress. Her eyes brightened quickly.

"That is my son," she said. "He came this morning in response to my wire."

Almost at once the subject of her volunteered information entered the room from the short hall. The Falcon rose and found the newcomer appraising him with bored insolence.

He was a strapping figure, and the remains of a military bearing were evident, but trimness had given way to a prominent paunch and patches of excess fat about cheeks and neck.

"My son, Captain Farragut Porter Haldane, Mr. Gate," Mrs. Haldane said, with a rise of pride, to the Falcon.

Her eyes turned upon the face of her son and she smiled courageously.

"This is Mr. Gate, Farry," she said. "He was very kind to call. He was playing bridge with your dear father and me yesterday afternoon."

Her voice faded into a sob but above it the Falcon's sensitive ear caught a sound that caused him to look beyond the broad figure that was advancing with outstretched hand to acknowledge the introduction.

The woman who had admitted the Falcon to the apartment had come only a step into the room behind Captain Haldane. The sound that had accosted the Falcon's sharp ears had been her sudden intake of breath when Mrs. Haldane amplified the introduction.

The Falcon found the younger woman staring at him with an expression that mystified him. A moment later she did little more than tilt an eye-brow in acknowledgment

when Captain Haldane introduced her as his wife.

But her earlier expression remained fixed in the Falcon's memory when he had made his departure and was ambling slowly along the corridor toward his own rooms.

"I wonder why it interested Mrs. Farragut Porter Haldane," he mused, "that I played bridge with her father-in-law yesterday afternoon."

CHAPTER XIII

A PERFECT THEORY

POLICE COMMISSIONER MARCUS BALDWIN, AFTER HIS PERsonal tour of investigation at Marmont Manor, did not long delay his decision to call for help.

That an unidentified man, apparently of refined walk in life, had been brutally murdered in a room occupied by a titled British woman who had disappeared during the night, demanded police activity beyond the limited jurisdiction of his orderly suburban village.

As a matter of form, coupled with an instinct of neighborly courtesy, the gray-haired commissioner had called first on Mrs. Haldane. He found after his visit no reason to disturb the report of accidental death as already entered in the records of his station. He was relieved to learn that the son of the unfortunate and highly respected major had arrived to take charge of the situation.

Thereafter, the commissioner closeted himself with the manager and the house-detective in the former's office. He was quite willing to agree with those greatly worried gentlemen that the shooting incident in the tap-room probably had been an outburst of rowdy exuberance. Since no great damage had been done and the lone victim had seen fit to flee thanklessly from the village hospital, he saw no reason to stress the episode in the police records.

Even the finding of the corpse of an obvious ruffian alongside the Manor building, taken by itself, would have been

regarded by the commissioner as calling for little more than dispatch of the body to the county morgue for possible identification, and autopsy to disclose the cause of death. True, a revolver was found in the man's clothes but it had not been discharged.

The trouble was, as the commissioner regretfully indicated to his confreres, that the corpse could not be dealt with as a necessarily segregated item.

This brought the discussion up to the real crux of the harrowing cataclysm that had assaulted the peace of Marmont Manor: the heinous murder of a young man in B-10.

The manager could offer only the information that the room had been properly engaged, on Thursday, by a modishly dressed young woman who had signed the register as Lady Miriam Wadringham, New York City. He had no address more specific than that, since she had come to the Manor obviously as only a week-end guest, carrying only light baggage.

None of her effects had been left behind in the room, the house-detective informed the commissioner.

"Did she have any callers or seem to know anybody here?" the commissioner asked.

"No callers that I know about, and she ate her meals alone," the manager said. "I did see her visiting in the lobby with Mrs. Haldane yesterday."

"I guess Mrs. Haldane's got plenty trouble of her own," the house-detective suggested sympathetically.

"I only mentioned it," the manager explained. "Still, if you know Mrs. Haldane, you know she makes it her business to pick up with anyone that happens to be sitting around here alone."

"Come to think of it," the house-detective amplified, "the Haldanes had her join them in a card game on the veranda

yesterday afternoon."

"That's right," the manager said quickly. "There was a telephone call for her from New York while she was out there. I took the message and sent it out to her by a boy."

"You *took* the message?" the commissioner asked, a faint ray of interest flashing in his mild eyes.

"The operator put the call on the desk, when the room didn't answer, so I happened to get it. The party—it was a man—told me not to bother about paging Lady Miriam but just to take a message and give it to her."

"Remember what it was?"

"About, I guess. His name sounded to me like Carleton or Carlavan. He asked me to tell Lady Miriam Wadringham that he could not come out to the Manor and I thought he said he was going to the second place. It didn't sound exactly clear to me but before I could ask him to repeat it or his name he said goodbye and was gone."

"Nervous, did it sound like?"

"I didn't think so but he talked fast and seemed in a hurry."

"From New York, you say?"

"He said he was calling from New York. I gave the message to a boy the way I understood it and I guess it made sense to Lady Wadringham because I heard nothing from her. It didn't seem important to me at the time, of course."

"No reason why it would," the commissioner agreed. "Was anybody else in the card game, do you know?"

"We can learn that from the boy, commissioner. He comes on duty at ten."

The commissioner stroked his chin.

"Not much to work on from here," he said, "but I'll get some men up here to check up on everybody that was seen with the lady. Looks like we'll have to get after it from

New York. The last train back to the city is at 11:50 at night. You wouldn't know if she was around later than that last night, would you?"

The commissioner included both men in his question.

"She could have gone away in an automobile," the house-detective answered brightly.

"Sure! Then the time wouldn't matter."

"But I *did* see her come in from the outside about 9:30 or so, and about an hour later I saw her come down, dressed different, and she walked out along the loge. Figured she was going to the grill but I didn't see her any more."

"Was she alone?"

"Both times, yes, commissioner."

"She could have been meeting somebody in the grill. Maybe we can pick up something from the waiters. I'll have my men get a description of her from you. By the way, you don't happen to know if she had a car of her own, do you?"

"No," the house-detective admitted.

"That wouldn't be a bad practice to check things like that, since you're having strange folks coming out here for week-ends," the commissioner counseled.

"You might bear that in mind," the manager said officiously to the house-detective.

"But it's too late to give us a line on Lady Miriam Wadringham," the commissioner pointed out sadly. "Did you happen to see anything of the young man who was murdered—around the place during the evening, I mean?"

"The way his head was crushed and his face cut up, it would be hard to say," the house-detective said.

"Last night was party night in the grill, you know," the manager added, "and the place was pretty well filled with strangers that we wouldn't especially notice. That's why

we really don't know just what happened in the tap-room."

"This Lady Miriam could have gone to the tap-room instead of to the grill when you saw her go into the loge, couldn't she?" the commissioner quizzed the house-detective with rising interest.

"She could, yes," the latter conceded.

The commissioner squinted.

"I'm beginning to wonder if all these things ain't mixed up together," he said thoughtfully. "Too bad nobody—not even the bartender or waiter—seems to know who was in the tap-room. Looks like my men passed over that too easy last night."

"Of course, it looks different to *you* now, commissioner, since we know what happened later in B-10," the manager argued apologetically.

"The trouble is we *don't* know what happened in B-10," the commissioner corrected soberly. "All we got is a body we can't identify. Funny there wasn't somebody in one of the rooms along that corridor that heard a noise."

"Most of the rooms were unoccupied, commissioner," the manager explained. "We use that part of the wing for week-end transients and not many come out before Saturday. Only a few show up on Friday, and this Lady Miriam Wadringham was unusually early, coming on Thursday afternoon."

A telephone bell rang and the manager picked up the instrument on his desk. While he was engaged with the interruption, the commissioner said to the house-detective:

"I'll send two men up and you can go over the ground with them. We'll have to pick up everything we can get from the bellboys, waiters and maids—quizz every one of them—and see if we can learn anything from any of the guests."

"I'll give all the help I can, commissioner. This is a helluva thing to happen to Marmont Manor."

"And to Marmont, too," the police official amended.

There followed a brief lull until the manager replaced his telephone. He turned about to face the other two men. Clearly agitated, he seemed deliberating upon a momentous announcement.

"Here's something else!" he finally blurted out.

The house-detective shifted nervously and his mouth dropped open. The commissioner waited patiently.

"It may be just one of those things that piles on top of a load of trouble, or it may not," the manager began ambiguously. "But I've just been told that another guest has flown during the night—didn't even occupy his bed!"

"For crying out!" the house-detective exclaimed, pounding one knee with a flabby fist. "Who *now?*"

"The worst of it is, this time it's B-9—the room straight across from B-10," the manager said. "The maid on that floor just went in B-9 to make it up and reported to the clerk that no one had slept in the room and the baggage was gone."

"Who was the guest?" the commissioner asked quietly. "Any chance it was *him* that was found in B-10?"

"No. The clerk that talked to me just now remembers renting B-9. The man came in yesterday afternoon. He was an unusually large man, the clerk says. He had a suit-case, too, and there is no baggage there now. The man registered as Stanley Matthews of Buffalo. He wanted to look at the rooms first so the clerk sent a boy up with him to show him the rooms in that wing. The boy came back and said the guest picked B-9 after passing up four other rooms in the same corridor."

"So he *picked* B-9," the commissioner meditated. "Much

difference in those rooms?"

"A little in the view from the windows, possibly. About the same size, only some have twin beds. Some have shower baths and others not."

"So a finicky person could have something to choose about, couldn't he?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so, commissioner."

"It's easy to jump the wrong way in a situation of this kind," the commissioner warned. "Let's see. The woman is from New York, came Thursday and was put in B-10. The man is from Buffalo, came twenty-four hours later and picks B-9 out of four or five rooms that the boy showed him."

"Of course, names and addresses could be false," the manager cautioned.

"I was allowing for that," the commissioner agreed. "But even if it was pre-arranged, it doesn't explain the murder. Usually in a case like that, it would have been this man Matthews that would have been murdered."

"I get what you mean," the manager said brightly. "If these two were getting together in a week-end liaison, and Matthews took B-9 because he knew the woman was in B-10, it would be somebody that trailed them that would be the murderer, and Matthews would have been the victim."

"That's the usual answer," the commissioner granted. "But it doesn't look like that, with Lady Wadringham getting that telephone message from New York."

The house-detective, who had been wholly out of the discourse, suddenly slapped his leg a resounding whack.

"I've got this thing doped," he announced enthusiastically. "It was just a accident that Matthews got a room across from the woman. But he *spotted* her, fell for her

hard, both of 'em *alone*, the woman was *disappointed* about her friend not coming out from the city, *there* you have it!"

"What?" the manager demanded.

"They got together in the woman's room last night, after I saw her come downstairs. That was only about 10:30. I'm just saying how it coulda been, you understand. The friend from New York comes out late and goes up to the woman's room. He finds the two together. There's a *fight*. The room showed *that*. Matthews is big. The other fellow is little. The little fellow *gets* it."

"It's at least a perfect theory," the commissioner conceded, a grin gathering in his mild gray eyes.

CHAPTER XIV

TAINTED INTEREST

WHEN THE FALCON, RETURNING FROM HIS VISIT IN THE Haldane apartment, regained his own rooms, he found the Sarge entertaining guests.

He needed no more than a glance at the two men sprawled out comfortably on a deep-seated divan to satisfy himself concerning their calling and surmise the reason for their presence. Nevertheless, the Sarge managed capably to convey a concise index of the situation.

"Looks like that Lady Miriam Wadringham that we got introduced to yesterday afternoon has got mixed up in somethin'," he said, chuckling deeply, "so these detectives dropped in to see if we picked up anythin' about th' lady that'd be useful."

"Sorry I've kept you waiting," the Falcon said, nodding to the two plain-clothes sleuths.

"I told 'em you was out for just a little while, so they thought they'd wait around," the Sarge volunteered. "Things was goin' *on* here last night, it seems."

The two detectives had got laboriously to their feet.

"I'm Officer Denton," said the larger of the two men, extending a broad palm in greeting, "and my partner here is Officer Byrnes."

"Of the Marmont force, I take it," the Falcon hazarded pleasantly.

"On the commissioner's staff, yes," Denton specified im-

portantly. He left no doubt that he was senior member and spokesman of the pair.

"Won't you be seated," the Falcon suggested, finding a chair while the two round-faced visitors sank back into their places on the divan. Denton promptly took charge.

"We understand from Mr. Hardy here, Mr. Gate, that you're both out here at Marmont Manor just for a quiet week-end," he began, "and I hope we ain't spoiling it by busting in on you this way."

"Not in the least," the Falcon insisted.

"Well, it's only because we picked up that you was playing cards with this Lady Wadringham yesterday. You see, we're trying to get to everybody that was in touch with her since she got here Thursday afternoon. We ain't got much of a line on her, except what she looks like and that she gave her address on the register as New York."

"You mean you're trying to *find* her?"

"Well, not exactly—not at this end. The commissioner's gone in to New York to have the detective bureau there work that angle. You see, a man was tapped in her room some time last night and this morning she was gone."

"*Tapped?* You mean *robbed?*"

"Worse! *Murdered!*"

The Falcon chose to limit his reaction to merely a blank countenance and narrowed eyes. Denton allowed a proper pause.

"Mind telling us, Mr. Gate, how long you knew Lady Wadringham?" he asked.

"As nearly as I can put it, I'd say it was about three-thirty or so yesterday afternoon when Mrs. Haldane introduced Mr. Hardy and myself to the lady," the Falcon recited patiently.

"How'd that *happen?* When did you *get* here?"

The Falcon grinned tolerantly.

"Answering the second question first—"

"I ain't meaning to rush you," the detective interrupted in confused apology.

"We arrived at the Manor a short time before luncheon, registered, established ourselves here in these rooms, had luncheon, and were seated quite to ourselves on the veranda enjoying the restful afternoon."

"All alone, hunh?"

"Until Mrs. Haldane broke in on us, yes."

"You mean Mrs. Haldane wasn't on the veranda when you went out there but came out later, hunh?"

"She really came up to Mr. Hardy, as I hadn't met her," the Falcon stipulated, amused that his evasion of the superfluous question had not ruffled his inquisitor.

"Yeh, her and me did a little chinnin' in th' lounge, when I picked up a book she dropped," the Sarge inserted. "That's how she got my name. Just a nice friendly old lady, I figured. Told me how many generals they was in th' family, ahead of th' major, her husband. Tough on her, I guess, th' way th' major dropped out. Heard somethin' about it downstairs this mornin'."

Denton tolerated the interruption but pressed after the Falcon eagerly when the Sarge paused.

"So then Mrs. Haldane only came up to Mr. Hardy?" he prompted.

"Asked him if he would fill in as fourth hand in bridge," the Falcon told him. "He said he didn't play the game and introduced me."

"I see. That's the first time you met Mrs. Haldane, hunh?"

"I recall, now, glancing at my watch at the exact moment, and it was not quite 3:45," the Falcon recounted, with perverse enjoyment. "A train had just come along

from the city a few minutes earlier and I had been looking down at the platform of the station."

Byrnes shifted into the process by observing pointedly: "That's right. There's a train gets in at 3:40."

"So *that* fixes the time," Denton conceded, reasserting himself. "What happened then, Mr. Gate?"

"Let's see. Mrs. Haldane explained that her husband, the major, and Lady Miriam Wadringham had been waiting with her for a friend of Lady Miriam to come out from the city, but that he had been detained, so that they needed a fourth player for their game."

"Did she say how she learned the lady's friend was detained?" Denton asked, almost breathlessly.

When the Falcon paused for a vague grin, Byrnes moved in.

"The commissioner's got the dope already about the 'phone call, Joe," he expostulated to his partner.

"Okay, Fred," Denton returned irritably, "but I was getting it from Mr. Gate *his* way. Them's the commissioner's orders. You understand, Mr. Gate," he inserted patronizingly, turning back to the Falcon, "this is only routine, just to cover the ground and pick up what we can about the lady, and I 'preciate your giving it to us just the way everything happened."

"I can see your purpose definitely, officer," the Falcon said.

Whereupon Denton abandoned the question that had occasioned the hitch and advanced another with uncooled ardor.

"Did Mrs. Haldane mention to you who *was* this friend of the lady's?" he propounded.

"She overlooked that," the Falcon admitted regretfully.

"I suppose she thought it could be of no interest to me."

"Yeh, I guess so. Well, then Mrs. Haldane took you and Mr. Hardy over to her table and introduced you to Lady Wadringham, and that's how it was you sat in the bridge game with them, was it?"

"Yes, but Mrs. Haldane also introduced us to the major," the Falcon amended punctiliously. "Neither Mr. Hardy nor I had yet met Major Haldane, you will remember."

"Sure! Did you hear Lady Wadringham say anything that you think would be of help to us, Mr. Gate?"

"No. As you undoubtedly know, officer, there is very little conversation in a bridge game. The players are usually intense, but I don't need to tell you that. As a matter of fact, the silence became so oppressive for my friend, Mr. Hardy, that he watched the play only a minute or two, then excused himself and went up to our rooms."

The Falcon glanced sorrowfully around at the Sarge when he added the last. The big fellow discharged a long-suppressed chuckle that came deep from his throat.

"Yeh," he corroborated, "I thought I better get away before I'd drop off to sleep and disgrace th' party."

Byrnes considered it a moment for relaxing laughter. Denton studied the solemn visage of the Falcon and decided to accept at face value the implied compliments the Falcon had cast his way. He took no issue with them.

The detective allowed a moment to collect the situation as he had it, then summed up:

"So *that* left just the four of you there, playing bridge. When did the game break up?"

"Something less than an hour later, I'd say."

"How? What happened?"

"Major Haldane found it necessary to go inside to use a

telephone. The three of us sat a while, discussing plays made during the game, as bridge players invariably do, you know."

"Sure!"

"It was perhaps ten minutes later when Mrs. Haldane went inside, followed by Lady Miriam."

"So you didn't have a talk alone with the lady?"

"No. The opportunity didn't present itself. As a matter of fact, I continued sitting alone on the veranda fifteen minutes or so before I went inside to rejoin Mr. Hardy up here."

For the first time during the long, winding discourse, the smile erased itself from the broad face of the Sarge. Had either detective glanced at the big fellow, a slight tightening of the thick lips could have been noticed.

The humorous prelude had come to an end. The Sarge, thoroughly practiced in police methods, knew that the time had arrived for a vital question, if one was to be presented.

He was not concerned about the Falcon's problem, if the quizzing should proceed into more hazardous territory. His chief, he knew, would be able to handle himself, just as adeptly as he had gathered personal amusement from the meticulous procedure up to this point.

The Sarge awaited questions to follow, rather, to learn how much the Marmont police knew or suspected.

The big fellow had been making his own appraisal of the two detectives, not without charity. Duties in a village like Marmont, he knew, offered little in education in the methods of tackling intricate crime. The usual calendar would comprise little beyond occasional burglaries, traffic violations and community complaints.

In Denton, the Sarge recognized the earnest detective, methodical to a fault, governed wholly by orders and hav-

ing neither natural nor trained instinct. He was equal to the requirements of ordinary routine but without training in a field that demanded resourcefulness. The Sarge dismissed Byrnes as a youthful rookie who was having his first coaching, which probably would carry him no further than the goal attained by his tutor.

There was a moment or two of silence as the gap in the procedure was weighed. Officer Denton sat in momentary study. The Falcon looked on with apparently mild interest. Byrnes toyed with his hat.

Whatever the Falcon had prepared himself for, Denton sprang a complete surprise. He got up rather snappily.

"Well, gentlemen, I guess that covers it," he announced. "Thanks, Mr. Gate. Just routine, you know. Makes me able to report that you didn't know this Lady Wadringham before, and only got into the card game with her through Mrs. Haldane."

"You'll be able to get Mrs. Haldane's version of it, of course," the Falcon prompted kindly, getting up.

"Sure!"

There was a knock at the door. The Falcon excused himself. At the door a bellboy handed him an envelope addressed to Mr. Jeffries Gate.

When he closed the door and turned back to the room, he found the Sarge shaking hands with the detectives and laughing jovially. A moment later, the Falcon and the Sarge had the room to themselves.

For a long minute the two companions sat facing each other, silent. The Falcon's face was an enigma. Its solemn expression held back the surging impulse of the Sarge. But finally the thick lips parted in a huge smile that soon gave way to an outburst of hearty laughter.

"I was wondering just how long you would be able to

suppress that," the Falcon said drily. "I imagine you have been suffering these past minutes."

The big fellow's face sobered but the hint of a sparkle remained in the clear eyes.

"I ain't sayin' they didn't make th' best of a bad job," the Sarge observed ambiguously.

"One surprising omission on the part of your friend Denton, however," the Falcon said seriously.

"One, hunh?"

"I'm astonished it hasn't occurred to you, old timer. He neglected to ask me who *won* the bridge game."

The Sarge chuckled.

"I was thinkin' that he stopped just about where I'd begin."

"He adhered admirably, I'd say, to the purpose in mind. He had learned that I was in Lady Miriam's company yesterday afternoon so he wanted to settle just how well, if at all, I know her. Consequently, he was covering the ground up to that point only. It is obvious that nothing has been brought to his attention to make him interested in our movements subsequent to the card game."

"Sure, I can see it okay, chief. Well, they didn't learn anything here they didn't know before."

"I've been viewing the interview rather from the angle of what *we* were able to learn, old man."

"Yeh?"

"We have to expect, for instance, that all employes of the Manor will be thoroughly quizzed, which still leaves certain possibilities relative to the episode in the tap-room."

"Lot o' strangers movin' around th' place last night, chief. Guess maybe not so many woulda known Lady Miriam if they saw her."

"Just one possibility I had in mind, Sarge: the waiter who

served Lady Miriam and me."

"Guess he wouldn't know who she was."

"Not unless the police begin trying to put these various incidents together and get into comparing specific descriptions."

"I wouldn't look for much in that line from Denton and Byrnes, chief."

"I'm thinking beyond them, old man, which is really the important thing we learned."

"What's that, chief?"

"The commissioner's journey to New York. That means first, of course, a search for Lady Miriam—also, probably, for the occupant of B-9, if they've got that far. But the police have at least one bona fide name for purposes of a search. That name is Philip Koster, which probably was obtained from the man's papers at the hospital. The police should be able to make quite a beginning if they find him, depending upon how much he knows."

"It *is* a chance, chief."

"But more important still, old man, is the possibility that the commissioner may bring some New York detectives back with him. We'd have to expect different methods. We must remember that, although the death of Major Haldane is dismissed lightly thus far as an accident, quite an independent murder has been committed, in a community of considerable repute, and the victim's identity is wholly in doubt. And the body was found in the room of ostensibly a woman of some social standing with a British title."

"Cripes, yes!"

"Which means not only New York detectives but in all probability a flood of New York newspaper reporters."

The Sarge was prompted to look at his watch.

"Almost half-past 'leven," he announced. "This joint'll

be swarmin' with reporters by one, chief."

When the Falcon merely peered at him quizzically, the Sarge drew a thick hand across his chin and said:

"Maybe it'd be just as well, chief, if we didn't keep on hangin' around this dump. There was them 'phone calls between here and B-10. Th' operator might remember 'em if they get after her hot. Anyway, we didn't beat it until th' town dicks had a crack at us, so it won't look funny if we check out."

"My visit with Mrs. Haldane was unfortunately interrupted," the Falcon reflected. "I was hoping to have further opportunity with her. I had just reached a fascinating point in a most interesting conjecture. Another minute or two, and I might have been able to learn why *she* was in Lady Miriam's room a bare few seconds before I stumbled upon the body of Major Haldane."

"Cripes, chief! *She* was there?"

"Circumstances strongly point that way, old timer."

"Gettin' deeper, ain't it?"

"By the way, her son has arrived—Captain Farragut Porter Haldane."

"Army man, hunh?"

"He wasn't in uniform and he looked rather otherwise."

"Retired, maybe."

The Falcon, pausing in study, suddenly noticed the envelope he still held—the one that had just been delivered to him. He tore it open idly—glanced at the card it divulged.

A moment later he looked across at the Sarge, grinning vaguely.

"I'm afraid, old man," he drolled, "you'll have to lunch without my company. I'm invited to a rendezvous."

"Yeh?"

"Mrs. Haldane is inviting me to have luncheon with her."

"Cripes! How could she—"

"This happens to be Mrs. Doris Kendrick Haldane, according to the engraved name on this card."

"I don't get it, chief. Who's she?"

"She seems to prefer her own family name for purposes of identity, apparently, to that of her illustrious husband, scion of the historic Haldane strain."

"Th' young captain's wife, you mean, chief?"

"I was just barely introduced to her as I was leaving the Haldane apartment. I had reason to suspect that she developed an immediate interest in me."

The Sarge looked at his chief uncertainly. He found only the characteristically expressionless countenance, yet he was unwilling to believe that the Falcon was not baiting him.

The big fellow's half-amused eyes followed the Falcon as the latter got up. His expression broadened into a smile when he detected the faintest hint of a grin.

The Falcon spoke lightly.

"I shall want you on hand, old man, if you don't mind risking the delicate fare of a tea-room. The young lady, not having met you, would be quite unaware of your presence."

"Oh, it's gonna be like *that*," the Sarge acknowledged.

"I shall travel to the appointed place in a taxicab, leaving the car for your use. In fact, since the young lady has set the time at 12:30, *you* might aim to make the place about five minutes earlier."

"I get th' lay chief. Sounds promisin'. She's *interested* in you, hunh?"

"I was able to catch just the faintest evidence of that fact when your very estimable friend, Mrs. Haldane, happened to mention to her son that I had played bridge with the

major and herself yesterday afternoon. That is why this otherwise impetuous invitation is not exactly a surprise to me. I rather suspected she would arrange a way to meet me."

The Sarge puckered his thick lips into a low whistle.

"Wonder where *she* horns in," he pondered. "This thing's gettin' crowded."

"It's just possible, old boy," the Falcon hazarded, grinning, "that we are getting one foot into the closet that holds that skeleton you began to suspect yesterday."

The Sarge stretched his huge hulk, yawning as he got up.

"And you ain't so sure th' young lady is gonna be alone when you meet her in th' tea-room," he ventured.

CHAPTER XV

UNEXPECTED CHARGES

THE PARKWAY ARMS EAT SHOPPE, ALTHOUGH PROVIDED with broad frescoed windows that fronted on the sidewalk, was accessible only from the narrow rotunda of the apartment building that bore the first part of the same name. It was closely adjacent to the parkway that wove into Westchester beyond Marmont, a drive from the Manor of no more than five minutes at moderate speed.

The Falcon wasted a bare second scanning his surroundings after discharging his taxicab. Beyond a scattering of parked automobiles, the tree-bordered block appeared totally abandoned.

Captain Haldane's wife approached him at once from a bench just inside the vestibule. For the moment they had the immediate area to themselves.

The anxious, imperative expression in the woman's gray eyes arrested the salutation that was on the Falcon's lips. She came close to him, hurriedly, and placed a hand, as if in restraint, upon his arm.

"If you don't mind," she said softly, "could I prevail upon you to address me as Doris while we are here? I'd rather, for reasons you can guess, that no one would overhear you address me as Mrs. Haldane."

"It *would* sound a bit formal, wouldn't it?" he admitted lightly, grinning narrowly.

Her expression remained severely cold, however, and

she ignored the banter. She had withdrawn her hand from his arm as soon as the gesture had served its purpose.

"Shall we go in?" she suggested, turning away from him without awaiting his rejoinder.

In the circumstances, he followed her in silence as she led the way along the carpeted passage. He used the opportunity for studying her briefly.

He found himself surmising that her extreme aristocratic manner was an effort. She was building up a point of her conduct, he guessed, studiously making herself difficult. He could not dismiss the impression of superficial restraint. He had had the same impression during that brief contact with her in the Haldane apartment.

He did not doubt that she possessed polish, and obvious culture, to a point that contrasted even with the result of his brief appraisal of Captain Haldane. Yet he suspected that her haughty behavior in his presence was conspicuously applied. She was capable of breaking the enamel, he guessed. The secret somehow was revealed, despite the severity in the gray eyes and the cold indifference of the sharp-featured face.

As he followed, the woman arrested an inclination to open the door of the eat shoppe. The approach of a couple from the rear of the passage seemed to have suggested more careful etiquette. She waited for the Falcon and permitted him to proffer his attentions.

Inside the door, the broad back of the Sarge loomed instantly at a table against the wall, placed first beyond the entrance toward the front. The place was long and narrow, with parallel rows of tables strung out both to the front and to the rear.

The grotesque picture of the Sarge, deposited lumpily upon a frail spindly wooden chair at a table that was

scarcely wider than his own frame, guided the Falcon in imposing his own decision when Doris Haldane surveyed the quarters uncertainly. Besides the Sarge, only an elderly couple occupied a table, also toward the front.

The woman had turned toward the rear when the Falcon's even voice reached her from behind.

"Suppose we take one of the front tables, Doris," he suggested.

He spoke just loudly enough for his words to reach a young waitress who approached them. The strategy defeated Doris Haldane's intended protest.

The Falcon's voice also had reached the Sarge but the big fellow's attention remained intent upon the microscopic shrimp cocktail with which he was laboriously engaged. But when the Falcon, slightly behind, passed close almost rubbing against the Sarge's table, he felt the nudge of a fist against his hip.

He glanced down. An instant later his hand clenched a folded bit of cardboard, torn from the menu, that the Sarge pushed toward him.

Before he reached the table against one of the windows to which the waitress had piloted them, the Falcon had read the scribbled message.

"Think your lady's got a palooka along," the Sarge had penciled.

The Falcon, a bare hint of amusement at the corners of his thin mouth, pocketed the pertinent missive as he moved to his place at the table.

In their positions across from each other, neither the Falcon nor his companion held an advantage. Each could glance sidewise the length of the tea-room, with the entrance from the building rotunda in view.

But the Falcon gave no concern to the entrance. The

Sarge, so strategically posted, would be a long time pacifying his infinite appetite.

With the waitress immediately at hand, it was necessary to confine attention to the menu. Doris Haldane ordered indifferently. The Falcon made his selection of items meticulously, engaging the counsel of the waitress on the savoriness of the *réchauffé*. The girl nodded toward the elderly couple three tables away and confided in a low tone that the *gentleman* seemed to have enjoyed his portion, and that her mother personally supervised the *cuisine*.

"You could hardly be disloyal to your mother, could you?" the Falcon posed drily.

"We have a name for making our things tasty," the waitress proclaimed.

When the waitress departed with the order, the Falcon permitted himself a moment to enjoy the impatience that clouded the gray eyes opposite him. He tilted forward in an attitude of benign *esprit de parti*.

"Casual contacts so repeatedly emphasize, don't you find, Doris, that the individual makes life tolerable for himself by developing enthusiasm in the thing he is doing? That young waitress, for instance."

"Possibly I haven't made a point of noticing. But now that you mention it, I could not fail to observe how exquisitely you illustrate the theory."

"Impetuous decisions, for example, are merely enthusiasm translated into action," he retorted.

"I'm sure you won't mind, Gate, if we abandon further conversational prelude. At any rate, we are established here, however it was arranged."

The Falcon grinned at the simple tactic she had employed in dropping the *Mister* in addressing him. Obviously, he

decided, she had rehearsed the meeting.

When he leaned back, peering at her soberly, she said in a lowered tone:

"I shall hardly need to tell you that only extraordinary necessity could have caused me to be guilty of my wayward conduct—in suggesting this luncheon."

"I haven't permitted myself to feel flattered by the attention."

"Your ready compliance at least suggests that my purpose must have occurred to you."

"You *did* rather take it for granted I'd be here," he accused.

"I had no reason to doubt it," she countered.

"Curiosity, my dear lady, accounts for my presence, really. People interest me in exact ratio to the extent that I become curious."

She shrugged, then leaned toward him.

"There are *several* matters. First, I am anxious to know what you said to my mother-in-law."

"What *can* reasonably be said in offering condolences?"

"I am not misled, believe me," she said pointedly. "Your visit was not prompted by sympathy for a woman you had scarcely met. You must have said something *shocking* to her. There is no other explanation for her present critical state—a condition that came upon her almost as soon as you had gone away."

"Since you have invalidated my right to sympathize, I express only amazement. Your mother-in-law seemed to be holding up astonishingly well when I was with her."

Her brow furrowed into an accusing frown when she countered:

"Until you departed, yes. It may surprise you—perturb

you, possibly—to know that she managed to say some things to me—and to her son—before she suffered an utter nervous collapse."

"Possibly I am dull," he pleaded.

"Things about your visit, I mean. Things which reduce your pretense to an absurdity."

He studied her pitilessly, his eyes deeply grooved, every trace of expression removed from his face. Until now she had not beheld the long, cold countenance that masked the Falcon characteristically when his every faculty was keyed to emotionless pursuit.

Already, the man had surprised her—upset her earlier speculation. She had expected to find him crude. She had been prepared to deal with a rogue, to cross points with incivility.

The Falcon's polished finesse put her at a loss—gave rise to doubts in her own mind. The self-command upon which she had depended, in her rash enterprise, already was hampered by an inexplicable apprehension.

The Falcon read Doris Haldane's gray eyes. To him, they bared the falsity of that calm pointed face. Suddenly he knew he could crush her with a dozen words—crumble the last atom of her pretended arrogance.

But he chose perversely to toy with her. It came to him, intuitively, that she had played into his hands. His thin lips drew barely apart. His words carried a metallic tang.

"Our presence here *could* become embarrassing," he said. "Suppose you drop being vague. Suppose you be explicit about why I am here."

It was a speech she did not expect but, spoken, she collected herself valiantly.

"Since you make it necessary," she began steadily, "very well, although you are not so dull that you do not suspect

why I had reason to meet you. I was present this morning when my mother-in-law made it appear to the police that you had been only casually drawn into her bridge game yesterday afternoon—the bridge game that presaged tragedy for the major. But after your visit with her, when you had succeeded in shattering her already strained nerves, she told me you had joined in that game by prearrangement with Lady Miriam Wadringham, who seems to have found it convenient to disappear from Marmont Manor. Do you see what I am getting at?"

She paused. The Falcon's face remained blankly across from her. Not without visible effort, Doris Haldane brought herself to displace the unanswered question with another.

"Is it so difficult to infer," she put to the Falcon slowly, "that *you* are *involved*—I shall omit a stronger word—in the tragedy that befell the major?"

Nothing of the Falcon's reaction to the amazing fabrication was betrayed when he asked with cutting indifference:

"You invited me to this clandestine meeting with you to make that inferential accusation against me? *Why?*"

"You probably recognize that I could easily transmit the information to the police."

"No, you won't do that."

"You seem very sure."

"Utterly positive. If you had a thought in that direction, you would have told the police at once instead of inviting me to luncheon."

"You think, I suppose, that I could not be moved to contradict the version given to the police by my mother-in-law?"

"I'd venture no appraisal of your capacity in that direction," he disclaimed.

"Then certainly, my very difficult antagonist," she

chided, "you *will* venture to divine why I chose to invite you to luncheon in preference to submitting my accusation to the police—a step which it still would not be too late to take if I should find you hopelessly intractable."

The Falcon restrained an impulse to denounce her fanciful insinuation. It occurred to him that his purpose would be best served by prolonging the contest in the hope of drawing her out. Thus far, she had done no more than present an amazing enigma that had become steadily more baffling.

"Since you do me the credit of endowing me with power of divination," he said blandly, "I must disillusion you and confess that I find myself unusually dense."

"Perverse, possibly—not dense."

When she was at the point of adding something to that, the waitress arrived with a tray and served their orders.

While the girl busied herself at the table, the Falcon plunged mentally into the complex aspect so unexpectedly placed upon the events that had broken into his intended week-end of quiet relaxation. Glancing absently toward the Sarge, he grinned vaguely, wondering what the big fellow would make of this newest development: the implied intention of Doris Haldane to hold over their heads (for some purpose still obscure) a threat of exposing their supposed involvement in the death of Major Haldane.

The woman's modulated voice drew his attention back to the table and broke abruptly upon his thoughts.

"I hope, Gate," she said affectedly, "that you will find the *réchauffé* exactly to your taste."

"I invariably find a puzzle fascinating, my dear."

The waitress glanced at him quickly with an expression of mingled hurt and resentment. But the Falcon's eyes

were on his plate and the woman across from him laughed uncertainly.

The ensuing lull in conversation continued after the girl had gone. Doris Haldane minced with her food, glancing now and then across the table, several times checking an impulse to reopen the discussion. The Falcon ate mechanically, scarcely a thought on his food.

The insinuated accusation bothered him little, primarily because it had been based upon rank falsehood. What annoyed the Falcon was his complete mystification that the woman should be injecting herself into the situation upon premises that embraced apparently a partial knowledge of facts supplemented by deliberate fabrication.

Obviously, the Falcon reflected, the woman had an object in the meeting which, for some reason not apparent, she was unwilling, or at least hesitant, to put into words. Her repeated insistence that he should be able to fathom that object, without her help, added to his bafflement.

True, he reasoned, the elder Mrs. Haldane *could* have been moved to express confidences to her daughter-in-law, in view of the delicate point he had touched upon with the major's widow just before her son's arrival in the apartment interrupted him. But Mrs. Haldane could *not* have said, as Doris Haldane now boldly pretended, that his participation in the bridge game had been pre-arranged with Lady Miriam.

On *what* was Doris Haldane basing that misrepresentation? The Falcon's mind tugged at that question.

No less confusing was the fact that this younger Mrs. Haldane seemed so frankly willing to speak of Major Haldane's death as something other than an accident, despite the conclusions that the police had been permitted to ac-

cept. It occurred to the Falcon that the young woman's assumption on that point conveyed a sinister implication of her mother-in-law—one that coupled with the link he himself had discovered by visiting the Haldane apartment.

Knowing what he did of circumstances actually involved in Major Haldane's death: of the note that had taken the major to Lady Miriam's room, of Lady Miriam's flight to B-9, of her obvious accomplice in that room, of the immediate removal of the prostrate major and the subsequent appearance of his body among the rocks near the Manor drive—reviewing that chain of circumstances, the Falcon wondered what unexplained roles could be attributed to the elder and the younger Mrs. Haldane, both of whom now appeared drawn into the vague skein.

He toyed with one thought. Doris Haldane had made a significant admission of ignorance. Despite her pretense, she had sought to learn *what* he had said to her mother-in-law.

Just to what extent, he mused, are these two women in each other's confidence in this situation? Or has anything at all passed between them?

What does Doris Haldane know, or suspect, he wondered, that enables her to suggest that I am involved with Lady Miriam?

His eyes narrowed upon a final question that fascinated him genuinely. I wonder in what respect, he speculated, I am to be required to be *tractable* under the threat of being exposed to the police.

In contrast with their earlier exchange, the two had eaten in silence until the waitress came along with dessert and coffee. The Falcon glanced at the girl, who now served him sullenly.

"Please tell your mother," he said to the girl, "that her *cuisine* has won another enthusiast."

"Thanks," the girl acknowledged dully.

Doris Haldane smiled coddlingly across the table.

"Then you *did* enjoy fathoming the puzzle, Gate!" she chided.

The Falcon peered across at her, a bare hint of a smile gathered at the corners of his mouth.

"I have been thoroughly absorbed, my dear," he said, "in reducing an intricate complication to its simple elements."

The waitress glanced at him dubiously. But the Falcon, his cool gaze challenging, saw the smile erase itself from Doris Haldane's face. Now, perhaps, she'll tell me *really* why she brought me here, he speculated. Yet he was not wholly prepared for the question she flung at him defiantly the moment the waitress had passed beyond earshot.

"Would you mind telling me," she asked, leaning toward him over her coffee, "at what time yesterday Lady Miriam Wadringham first communicated with you?"

His thoughts reverted at once to the telephone contacts that had been made between B-10 and his own rooms. Lady Miriam had 'phoned him at about five o'clock, soon after he had made his brief discovery at the open door of her room. He had called Lady Miriam at ten o'clock to suggest the meeting in the loge; she had made her final, interrupted call perhaps at eleven-thirty.

How could Doris Haldane have learned about those calls, he wondered. Had she posed that question merely to lend substance to her earlier threat?

There flashed suddenly into the Falcon's mind the realization that the woman across from him was as deeply interested in Lady Miriam as in himself. He weighed the framing of her question. It did not imply knowledge of the actual telephone calls. He suddenly suspected that she was

aiming by mere hazard, doggedly avoiding what was actually behind her purpose.

He sipped at his coffee while she waited for an answer. He peered narrowly at her until she no longer could keep her eyes upon his baffling countenance. Then he spoke softly.

"It's been a splendid luncheon," he said. "I shouldn't like to be ungrateful for your hospitality. But I'm afraid I can't pay my debt to you by answering questions. I am totally out of practice. Perhaps I should apologize for assuming that you would have something to say to me. Shall we be going?"

The blow hit her bluntly. He waited, confident that he had forced her to a decision. Unless she abandoned the purpose for which she had met him, she would have to turn her cards face-up now.

After a moment, the drained color returned to Doris Haldane's angular cheeks. Her mouth twitched just an instant.

"Very well, we'll go," she acquiesced. "I'm sure I made clear to you what you have reason to expect. Perhaps I shall find another way to let you hear from me."

The Falcon received that stoically but through his mind ran the question: I wonder what it is she can't quite bring herself to say to me. Studying her, he suspected that he found the answer to that question in her gray eyes that were full upon him. In them he read doubt. She was not sure.

When she pushed back as if to rise, the Falcon checked her.

"A moment, please, until the girl comes with the check."

She fumbled at once at her bag but he grinned, waving aside her intention.

"I've given you such poor results, really," he said, "that

I cannot permit you to pay for the experiment."

She looked away from him, bored.

As if searching for the waitress, the Falcon turned to scan the long room. His gaze focused upon the big face of the Sarge. The latter picked up his crumpled napkin and dabbed indifferently at his mouth.

The Falcon grinned vaguely at the flashed message. The big fellow had informed him that his suspicions had not been aroused, although more than half of the tables in the place were now occupied.

The Sarge had almost a crestfallen expression. Disappointment seemed written in his clear eyes—obviously, as the penciled note he had slipped to the Falcon had hinted, the big fellow had anticipated at least mild diversion.

Twisting about in his chair, the Falcon succeeded in knocking his own napkin to the floor. Before he had picked it up, the Sarge was executing the deftly conveyed order. He already had paid his check—there was nothing to impede his departure.

Barely a minute later the Falcon was holding the door open for Doris Haldane to precede him into the rotunda. She moved away slowly until he had closed the door and come along a step behind her.

Suddenly the young woman stepped aside. Instantly a blinding flash filled the forward end of the narrow passage.

A young man, half the distance ahead to the street door, immediately gathered up a black case from the floor and, with his open camera under an arm, dashed toward the exit.

The fugitive, however, did not quite reach the door before he encountered a broad foot of the Sarge. The young man went sprawling on the floor, his paraphernalia scattered. In regaining his own equilibrium, the Sarge unceremoniously planted a solid heel upon the abandoned camera,

effectively disgorging its more vital entrails.

Doris Haldane fled swiftly past the scene of the contretemps and escaped to the sidewalk. The Falcon emulated her example, although limiting his pursuit to a point from which he was able to observe her hasty disappearance into a cabriolet parked a short distance away.

The smart car was drawing away when the Sarge came up.

"That *her*, chief?" the big fellow asked, nodding toward the receding car.

"That's the young Mrs. Haldane rushing frantically from the scene of her conquest, old timer."

"Got her *own* car!"

"Apparently. You didn't see her arrive, then? I thought from your note—"

"She was here when I got here," the Sarge explained. "I was pretty sure from what you told me. She was here on th' sidewalk, just outside th' door, talkin' to th' squirt that just got all tangled up with my foot."

"You managed that nimbly, you old son-of-a-gun. Rather maltreated his camera, I'm afraid."

The Sarge chuckled deeply.

"Yeh. I learned that trick when I was a rookie. Guess you was right, chief. She sure is *int'rested* in you, wantin' your photograph. Sorry I had to mess it up."

"I gathered you were sorry the way you went about it. If you're quite sure the negative is beyond salvaging, suppose we make for our car."

"I guess we can go, chief."

CHAPTER XVI

A CALL ON THE DEAD

THE GRAY ROADSTER WAS AT THE POINT OF NOSING INTO THE parkway when the Falcon dropped a hand gently on the near arm of the Sarge.

"Let's hang over here a bit, old man," he prompted.

The Sarge swerved the car to the side of the road and brought it to a purring halt.

"I'm just beginning to put pieces together," the Falcon said reflectively, glancing at the big face beside him. "They seem to fit amazingly."

"They gen'rally do, chief, when *you* get to workin' on 'em."

"In this instance I'm afraid I've been a little slow. Because the aspect has become a trifle incongruous, I suspect."

"People go in for funny layouts, chief. Sometimes it's a helluva job tryin' to dig out a motive."

"Precisely. And in the school that gave you your very excellent training, I recognize that establishment of motive usually is the first objective in approaching a puzzle."

"That's th' way police hafta work when they's no direct evidence pointin' to th' criminal. Motive narrows it down to who mighta done it, or what kinda palooka to look for. You know, chief, when you take away all th' fancy trimmin's, they ain't so many motives for murder. They's robbery, money, jealousy, revenge, rape—or maybe stampin' out some bozo that might cause trouble, like what happened

to Slim last night, I guess. If it don't fall in one of them main classes, it's gen'rally th' job of some kinda nut that's broke loose. Then we have them lab'ratory cases once in a while. Psychopathic murders that they write books about."

"You've covered the general classifications expertly, old timer. According to your usually reliable analytical standard, I'd probably be charged with attempting to build a house on sand."

"How do you mean, chief?"

"In my extremely fascinating problem concerning our young friend, Doris Haldane, I am beginning without any theory about motive," the Falcon confessed.

"I wouldn't put *my* rules against *yours*," the Sarge hastened to amend, grinning with almost boyish allegiance. "You think she's tied up, chief?"

"My immediate problem, old man, is merely to establish the ground for her astonishing interest in what has taken place in Marmont Manor since four o'clock yesterday afternoon."

"Is that what she wanted to see you about?"

"Whatever her real reason may have been, she carefully avoided mentioning it, which circumstance in itself is one of the pieces I have been putting into the structure that now seems suddenly to have taken shape in my mind. I rather suspect that she reckoned our meeting today as possibly only a preliminary skirmish, which accounts for her prosaic attempt to add my photograph to her reference portfolio."

The Sarge, studying the thoughtful face beside him, vetoed his impulse to press a question upon his chief.

"Doris Haldane wants me to feel," the Falcon resumed, "that she has reason to believe that I am involved with Lady Miriam Wadringham, and that she purposes to wield that supposed knowledge over my head to accomplish some

object that remains to be discovered. She asked me when Lady Miriam first communicated with me yesterday. I supposed at the time she was referring to our telephone contacts, although I was doubtful that she could know about them. Doris Haldane had in mind, I am satisfied now, that Lady Miriam communicated with me at some earlier time yesterday for the purpose of arranging my presence in the bridge game."

"How could she get a line like that?"

"Don't you see how it shapes up, old timer? She knew that Lady Miriam's own friend was supposed to have played in that game and she chooses not to believe her mother-in-law's statement that I came only casually into that game. She believes *I* am that friend of Lady Miriam. Now *why* would *that* make her interested in me?"

"Cripes, chief! It's deep!"

"Not so deep, old man. What has made so many persons at the Manor interested in me since yesterday afternoon, beginning with Lady Miriam and going on through the various members of the wrecking crew who failed to get very far with their wrecking?"

"Why, th' *package*, chief!"

"Precisely. The *bonds!* There's just this one difference, Sarge. Lady Miriam and all the others knew those bonds were delivered to me because of an error."

"Sure."

"But Doris Haldane believes those bonds were delivered to me because they were *intended* for me—intended for *me* as the man Lady Miriam was *expecting* to have in that bridge game. Why does that *mean* something to the young Mrs. Haldane?"

When the Falcon paused upon that question, the Sarge fingered his smooth chin dubiously, his eyes aglow, but he

ventured no answer.

The Falcon leaned back, and when he spoke again his voice was low, quiet.

"Isn't it almost reasonable to suppose," he conjectured, "that she *knows* why those bonds were delivered so guardedly—what bearing they may have had on Major Haldane's death? If so, *why* would she remain silent about it?"

"Cripes!"

The Sarge added to that characteristic exclamation a low, amazed whistle.

When the big fellow seemed to have recovered from his amazement at that staggering implication, the Falcon added, as if it was no more than a droll afterthought:

"To which, of course, is to be appended Doris Haldane's blasé insinuation to me that she could, if she chose, upset the accepted police theory that Major Haldane's death was the result of an accidental fall."

"She said *that?*" the Sarge queried quickly.

"Adding, incidentally, that *I* am directly involved in the tragedy. Quite a weapon she has devised to point threateningly at my vitals, wouldn't you say, old boy?"

The Sarge hunched down in his seat.

"And she *wouldn't* say why she was pointin' it at you," he mused. "Funny!"

"A very obvious reason. There's just an *element* of doubt about it all in the young lady's mind. I'm wondering if she suspects how she laid herself bare."

"What are we doin', chief?"

"If you managed reasonably well to silence that ravenous appetite with what the eat shoppe had to offer you, I suggest we drive along into the city. Far enough, that is, to discover one or more telegraph offices. I feel inclined to send a message or two—but it probably would be discreet

not to send more than one from any single office."

The Sarge reached for the shift lever but before he had engaged the motor his hand paused and he turned to look at the Falcon. Lines of genuine concern were written upon the big fellow's face, suddenly sobered.

"About Marmont Manor, chief," he said. "Thinkin' of still hangin' around there?"

"It *is* just possible, old timer, that we might begin to feel somewhat cramped there," the Falcon conceded. "I've been thinking of those telephone calls. Ordinarily, a hotel operator makes no record of room-to-room calls and would not be likely to remember them. But it's just possible, of course, when New York detectives and reporters get on the job, intensively and in numbers, that some trick of memory will respond to the power of suggestion. As a matter of fact, that is a situation I was intending to meet with a telegram."

The Sarge grinned his relief.

"Okay," he acknowledged with recovered vigor. "I was thinkin' we could play this game better if we held th' cards in our own hands."

The Falcon pondered in amusement over that as the car slid quietly forward into the parkway. He felt a surge of emotion as he glanced aside at his big associate, knowing that there was no man-made danger before which he would cringe, if he could face it. But like himself, the Sarge knew that they could not carry far in their chosen career, if they disregarded such petty menaces as being trapped asleep because of a mere traced telephone message.

The two men were silent, each with his own thoughts, as the little car followed swiftly the winding course, traveling against the almost unbroken stream of Saturday afternoon traffic outbound from New York. The Sarge avoided penetrating the maze of Bronx Park but bore to the west to cross

toward Grand Concourse.

A mile farther on the big fellow's searching eyes discovered the familiar window of a branch telegraph office. In the next cross-street he found parking space.

"Here's number one, chief," he said. "Far enough in?"

"Splendid! It assures a New York date line, which is all that matters. I imagine you will find it simple to negotiate for transmission of a reasonably imperative message to Mr. Jeffries Gate at Marmont Manor."

"Easy, chief," the Sarge chuckled.

He waited, grinning widely, while the Falcon penciled a memorandum. He was gone from the car only minutes to file the message.

A similar episode was staged some fifteen minutes later when the gray roadster had been brought to a stop not far from a telegraph office opposite Yankee Stadium. On that occasion, however, the message indited by the Falcon was directed to Captain Farragut Porter Haldane, % Marmont Manor.

The Sarge's curiosity was only in part allayed when the Falcon explained: "Just an experiment, old timer. If we make fair time getting back to Marmont, we may possibly be on hand to observe its results."

It was nearing three o'clock when the gray car, circling Marmont's landscaped plaza, ignored the turn into the Manor drive but bore on past two blocks of smart retail shops that distinguished the business center of the village. At the end of the second long block, the Sarge swerved the car into a narrow tree-lined thoroughfare, both sides occupied by weather-worn residences.

"Ben Foster, th' house-dick at th' Manor," the Sarge muttered, "told me they'd hold th' body here maybe 'til Monday, hopin' it'd be identified."

The narrow street came to an end, after a single block of considerable length, when it joined a hedged thoroughfare that extended alongside the railroad tracks. The corner on the right was occupied by a somberly painted three-story frame residence of ample dimensions, set far back on a wide, evenly kept lawn that was shaded by a group of venerable oaks. A low picket fence surrounded the plot, behind which a modestly painted sign disclosed that the splendid edifice and its grounds had been diverted from their original purpose. The sign bore the simple but significant legend: *Cranton Funeral Home.*

"Suppose you head around into the other street, old man," the Falcon suggested. "We can walk back."

"Okay, chief."

When they had returned and were standing at the small gate in the picket fence, the Sarge observed: "Kinda swell layout for folks that can't enjoy it when they come here."

Above the thick foliage of trees in the block beyond, the square rock tower of a church looked imposingly down upon the solemnly quiet place. The stillness seemed even more pronounced after a train had rumbled by behind the tall hedge across the way.

A single car was parked at the side. A long limousine, standing in the private driveway at the rear of the grounds, was visible through the trees. Beyond that, the vista offered no evidence of habitation.

"Quiet," the Falcon said softly.

"Yeh."

"I couldn't forego standing here a moment to visualize what this splendid place must have been at another time."

"Yeh. Used to be a home, looks like."

"It's obvious. I can imagine happy laughter trailing out among these trees from that wide, once friendly porch—

youngsters scampering merrily across this lawn—music and voices radiating from those windows that now have their shades drawn to shut out life from a house of death."

The Sarge glanced at his chief uncertainly. It was not often that he heard the Falcon give voice to emotion, even slight.

The big fellow, invariably susceptible to the Falcon's moods, had slipped figuratively down into his shoes, searching his mind vainly for a fitting rejoinder. But before he could find one the Falcon said, more naturally:

"I find a moment like this an excellent spiritual tonic, old timer. A setting without people in it, that emphasizes the limitations of mortality. People who come here, as you say, may not enjoy it, but it symbolizes the only thing in life that is flawlessly complete: *the end*. I believe I shall remember Marmont longer for this distinctive adjunct, than for the grotesque blend of antique and modern affectation we have come to know as Marmont Manor. Suppose we go in before we are suspected of contemplating purchase of the place."

A lettered panel beside the door made ceremonious entrance unnecessary. Only after the two companions were inside a wide, short hall were they approached unobtrusively by a tall, frock-coated young man whose close shaven cheeks accentuated his angularly sorrowful expression.

The man merely bowed.

"We are guests at Marmont Manor—just bare acquaintances of the Haldane family," the Falcon said.

"You will want to see the major's body—certainly," the young man interpreted with expert alacrity, his thin brows rising to a formal arch.

He indicated the door of a parlor at one side.

"You may want to sign the register," he supplemented,

pointing a long, thin finger toward a small table against the wall.

The young man was bowing his intention to withdraw when the Falcon broke once more upon his poised routine.

"I believe there also is another body here," he said; "the body of a young man who has not been identified, or has he, possibly?"

The young mortician deliberated, dropping his chin and staring vacantly.

"You mean the body taken from a room in the Manor early this morning?" he asked perfunctorily.

"Yes. Some of the commissioner's men were talking to us about it. Just a possibility, you know, that we may have seen the man about the building or grounds."

"Then you don't wish to see the major?"

"By all means, we shall want to pay our respects. I've already visited Mrs. Haldane. Quite shaken, naturally. I imagine the autopsy definitely established that the major's death was wholly accidental."

"*Autopsy?* There was no need of an autopsy with a broken neck—and only the expected bruises of a bad fall."

The young man had been unguardedly led into the unprofessional assertion. The Falcon had excluded the faintest tinge of interest from his apparently indifferent remark.

"Naturally," he agreed drily. "You'll pardon a layman's error, I'm sure."

The young man grinned funereally, the operation calling for a bare congestion of the thin brows.

"When you've seen the major's remains," he said, "I'll be glad to take you back to the mortuary. The body, I might say, hasn't yet been identified. In fact, aside from the police, you gentlemen are the first to inquire about it."

"Merely a vague hope to be of help," the Falcon rejoined.

"It's appreciated. It would be preferable, obviously, to have identification."

The Sarge managed to suppress his surging comment until the Falcon and he were alone beside the somber casket that contained the gaunt remains of Major Eustace Porter Haldane. Then he whispered hoarsely, through a low chuckle:

"Undertakers can make out their bill better, I guess, when they know who they're gonna send it to."

But the Falcon was gazing raptly at the marble face imbedded in the satin folds of the casket lining.

As if he had not heard the facetious observation of the Sarge—as if a thought had just been flashed into his mind by the still face at which he peered so closely, the Falcon repeated softly, but with an inflection different from that the young man in the hall had employed:

"*There was no need of an autopsy with a broken neck.*"

Turning from his intent scrutiny of the corpse, the Falcon said to the Sarge: "I have an impulse, old timer, to offer a bit of help to the estimable police department of Marmont. The major seems to deserve it."

The Sarge's eyes widened but he managed to check his surprise.

"I guess they ain't got much chance gettin' on th' right track about th' major if you don't, chief," he observed quietly.

They turned, but before they had reached the door into the hall, voices from beyond the opening arrested their steps. For a moment they paused, listening.

When the voices faded, the Falcon moved quickly to the door, the Sarge following closely.

CHAPTER XVII

DORIS HALDANE IN COMMAND

THE FALCON STEPPED INTO THE HALL JUST IN TIME TO catch sight of a trio disappearing through an arched doorway at the rear.

The young man with whom he had spoken was leading the way, a broad-shouldered man closely in tow. As if lagging uncertainly behind, a tall, slender woman followed the pair.

The Falcon had only a brief glimpse of the receding figures, yet there was a significant tilt at the corners of his mouth as he glanced quickly at the Sarge. He confined himself to a nod to the big fellow as he led the way, moving softly toward the rear of the hall.

Beyond the arched opening, the two men found themselves in a narrow, short passage that resembled a converted butler's pantry. A wooden door at the end stood widely ajar, admitting a draft of chilled air into the close, stuffy passage.

At the door, coming up to it noiselessly, the Falcon halted, the Sarge taking a position that permitted him to gaze over his chief's shoulder. Their appearance at the door had been unobserved by the three persons in the room into which they peered.

The room was tall and square, of unexpectedly large dimensions. The rear wall had two small square windows, set high above the floor. Their stained glass panes admitted

little daylight, but the room was blindingly aglow, in sharp white light from a powerful bulb set in a large ceiling reflector.

The floor of the room was of white tile, lending an additional reflection to the strong flood of light. Long bare, enameled tables stood at one side of the room. A tall glass cabinet occupied a corner, the nickeled handles of instruments on some of the glass shelves scattering dazzling shafts of reflected light.

The three persons who had entered the room stood grouped about one end of a marble-topped slab that occupied a position near the far side wall. Upon closer inspection, it became apparent that the slab was, in fact, a heavily bracketed shelf that had been drawn out from a refrigerated wall compartment, the thick doors of which stood open.

The young man attached to the place stood at the head of the slab, one side toward the watchers at the door. At his left was the heavy figure of Captain Farragut Porter Haldane. The captain, standing to face the door, would have observed the intruders if he had not been bent over the slab, staring down intently.

Across from Captain Haldane, erect and showing less interest, stood Doris Haldane. Her back was toward the open door of the room.

On the slab, in sharp relief in the bright flood of light, lay the stony white body of a man. The corpse was naked to the hips, a sheet spread over the lower portion.

Livid streaks showed across the forehead of the body, and the face otherwise bore evidence of disfigurement. The scalp itself was not exposed, only straggling bits of brownish hair protruding beneath the edges of a tightly drawn covering similar to a surgical dressing.

As if courtesy demanded his withdrawal, when Captain

Haldane continued engaged in his scrutiny, the young man stepped back from the head of the slab and swung about.

"I'll be back presently," he murmured.

His sweeping vision encountered the two men at the door.

He glided slowly in their direction with a step so light that his movement failed to distract the Haldanes. Neither had acknowledged his softly spoken announcement.

Even at the door the young man made no further sound. His angular face retained its sepulchral vacuity as he just barely glanced at the Falcon and the Sarge. But he granted them the freedom of the tomblike chamber with a nodded gesture. For himself, the young man squeezed past them into the narrow passage and moved on to the hall.

The Falcon had wasted no more than an instant upon the funereal visage of the young mortician. Advancing only a step into the room, in accepting the welcome, his peering gaze remained ferreted upon Captain Haldane. The Sarge drew up beside him, scarcely breathing.

The move that broke the tense spell was made by Captain Haldane. Suddenly he bent still lower over the corpse as he reached forward with one hand. With his finger-tips he lifted, half turned the left hand of the still figure on the slab.

Even to the two men who watched from behind her, the shudder with which Doris Haldane reacted to that unexpected movement by her husband was disclosed. For the first time she, too, bent over. Her gaze swept up suddenly from the hand of the corpse to her husband's face.

The object of Captain Haldane's aroused interest became evident. He was bestowing his attention upon a heavy gold circlet on one of the fingers of that clammy white hand. He glanced at the underside and discovered a snake-head mounting, where it had slipped around.

At once he dropped the hand and moved closer to the end of the slab. He slipped a hand under the bound head of the corpse and raised it to examine the back of the neck.

A half-stifled exclamation escaped from his lips as he lowered the mutilated head and peered into the upturned face.

"The *ring!* The *scar* on the neck! It's Bob Dale. How did he—"

Doris Haldane acted impetuously. She reached across the corpse and covered her husband's mouth with an outspread palm.

"Don't tell them!" she exclaimed in a trembling whisper.

Captain Haldane, without rising, stared up at his wife. She withdrew her hand.

"What do you—" the man began, amazement flashing from his eyes, but his wife interrupted.

"You don't need to identify him," she said softly, obviously agitated. "It will mean scandal, happening along with your father's death."

"But the *telegram!* Whoever sent that must *know*—or *suspect!*"

"The body may not be identified if it does not remain here long."

"What are you—"

"Sh! Let's drop it for the present. We'll go. We *don't know* him. *Understand?*"

The Falcon already had backed out of the room at the moment of Doris Haldane's surprising gesture, the Sarge acting upon the hint of an elbowed nudge. The last of the dialogue reached them through the open door while they stood beyond range of possible detection.

Something in the woman's tone as she issued her virtual

command to her husband sent a rapid thought through the Falcon's mind. Her voice had become imperious, almost insolently domineering.

An extraordinary role for the strapping captain—scion of the illustrious military Haldanes—the Falcon reflected. He grinned in recollection of the woman's recent attempt to test her powers of persuasion upon himself.

At the evident finality of the domestic exchange, the Falcon turned, pushing the Sarge ahead of him. But before they could escape from the passage into the hall, the young man (whose absence from the mortuary had occurred so fortuitously for Doris Haldane) came almost headlong into them, returning with his characteristic cat-like tread.

"Leaving, gentlemen?" he intoned perfunctorily.

"I'm afraid we're of no help," the Falcon said.

At that moment Captain Haldane and his wife emerged from the room.

The young man backed out of the passage with a stiffly formal bow. The Falcon and the Sarge, however, made no effort to step into the hall. In instant accord, they chose to remain in the obscure shadow of the passage. Both men pressed against the wall to permit the Haldanes to pass.

Coming from the bright glare of the mortuary, the couple saw only vaguely the two men who pushed aside for them. Moreover, they were intent upon passing, Doris Haldane leading the way with ill-disguised haste.

The young man in the hall became occupied with attentions due the Haldanes, since they were in effect patrons of the establishment at the moment. That circumstance led easily to his temporary abandonment of the two men left behind in the passage.

To allow the Haldanes time for departure, the Falcon

moved toward the door of the brightly lighted room.

"We may as well really look at the corpse, old man," he suggested.

"Sure, chief."

When they stood beside the slab, the big fellow said: "It's *Slim*, okay. So it's Bob Dale, whoever *he* is. And your lady friend wants to keep it dark!"

"From what we overheard," the Falcon observed drily, "I rather imagine that the doughty captain obeys orders."

"Yeh. She whistles and he dances. Must be somethin' in their contract, chief, that ranks her higher than th' captain."

"If appearances mean anything, I'd say that the captain has been some time *out* of the army."

"Guess th' Haldane line of heroes wound up with th' major. It'll be tough on th' old lady with th' family crackin' down to only a stable-horse."

"Mrs. Haldane, Sarge, has the rare companionship of portraits that will never lose their splendor for her."

When they were returning to the passage, the Sarge said:

"Guess we was on hand, chief, for th' answer to your telegram, and it told us plenty. I wondered why you sent th' wire to th' captain instead of th' woman."

"I had an idea that the captain would act openly and promptly. Doris Haldane probably would have *covered* her response to a message suggesting that she might be able to identify the body."

"Th' way she seems mixed up in this mess, guess you're right. Don't look like th' police will get any help out of it."

"Possibly not *directly*, old timer," the Falcon agreed enigmatically.

Some seconds later, the drab countenanced young man was nodding the two visitors out of the front door.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CLUE UNCOVERED

MARMONT'S ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER WAS AN EDIFICE THAT substituted a singular style of quaint individuality for such splendor as the wealth of the community could have afforded. It was a wealth, incidentally, for which the tall banking and brokerage structures that crowded the lower tip of Manhattan were largely the fountain source.

But the bankers and brokers (with a scattering of architects, artists and literary personages) who steadfastly had barricaded their vaunted home community against coarse encroachments by less fastidious municipalities that pressed against the proud little area on all sides, leaned strongly toward economical simplicity as a civic keynote. They reserved grandeur for their homes, many of which were imposing structures, surrounded by lavish grounds. The more spectacular among them were set upon the slopes or crests of rock-studded hills similar to the one from which Marmont Manor frowned down upon the surrounding valleys.

There was a measure of grandeur, too, in the church edifices of the little community, and in the prodigal architecture of its public school spread across a vast plot that one of the first settlers had donated for the purpose. But beyond those departures civic aspirations had become dwarfed, deliberately rather than by oversight.

The village hall which had served the needs of a wayside cluster of homes continued to meet the simple requirements

of a community that bulged against its confined borders. It stood regarded more as a symbol of incorporated protection than for the importance of its functions. On occasions, the frugal village fathers made appropriation for a new coating of gray paint on the plaster exterior of the modest structure. But its discolored stone steps and its creaking floor-boards remained.

As has been hinted, however, what Marmont's village hall lacked in splendor it made up for in quaint architecture. It belonged to no specific school of design, although it faced the village plaza, across from the railroad station, with a semi-circular façade of tall Ionic columns that supported a balustraded canopy. The latter covered a brief cement porch approached by a shallow flight of stone steps that encircled it on three sides.

Beyond the entrance façade, however, the lines of the building were more severely defined, achieving somewhat the general effect of a mausoleum. The roof, on the other hand, was a series of low gables and modest cornices, the whole surmounted by a peculiarly slender gray dome.

Seemingly because the village plaza in front and the wide main thoroughfare along one side provided open surroundings, the building hugged against the sidewalk line on both sides of its corner site. A mere graveled gangway separated it from a low business building at the rear. On the fourth side, a plain square extension provided quarters for the community's fire-fighting apparatus.

Besides the front entrance from the porch, there was a small side entrance near the rear, reached from the street by a narrow iron stairway that led up to a small cement vestibule.

A wide hall extended the length of the building, affording direct connection between the two entrances. The hall

also definitely separated the main floor into its two principal divisions, one half being given over to provide public library facilities and the other affording space for public functionaries. Perhaps half of the latter space, toward the front, was employed as police headquarters.

The windows of the library rooms looked across the main thoroughfare at the tall stone wall that formed an embankment for the sharply rising slope of Marmont Manor's tangled grounds. Only at one point was there a break in the masonry—a narrow stone steps dropped to the sidewalk from the foot-path that wound down from the fringe of the Manor's esplanade.

Opposite the glass-paneled doors of the library, across the hall, a wooden door of ordinary dimensions stood ajar. Stepping through it, the Falcon found himself alone in a room of scant area. It seemed the more cramped because a low wooden rail, entirely across the room, left barely more than a passage directly inside the door.

The space behind the rail was occupied largely by a broad desk, the top of it pushed snugly against the rail. Beyond the desk was an open door connecting with a room at the front of the building.

In the wall opposite the rail another door stood open, and mingled voices from the room beyond it reached the Falcon as he hesitated uncertainly. Assigning the Sarge to other purposes, he had come alone, almost directly from the undertaking establishment, upon this venture in Marmont's police domain.

From the voices, the Falcon judged that the room beyond the open door at his left was a place of general assembly for the police force, or squad-room. The door beyond the rail, he speculated, indicated the commissioner's office. Obviously, the desk behind the rail was the ordinary point of

contact for a casual intruder—the bailiwick of the desk-sergeant on duty.

The Falcon had intended to make direct request for an audience with the commissioner. The abandoned status of the room, however, prompted him to a different procedure. He strode calmly through the open door at his left.

He found himself in a large square room. Its furnishings consisted solely of a small roll-top desk in one corner, a group of wooden arm chairs beside it, and long benches at two sides of the room.

A man in shirt-sleeves sat at the desk. Two men were sprawled in nearby chairs. No uniformed policemen were in evidence. A wall clock pointed to a minute after half-past three.

The Falcon found answer to his uppermost query in a first sweeping glance as all three men raised their faces toward him. Neither Denton nor Byrnes was among the men in the room.

The Falcon made no direct approach. He moved nonchalantly toward a side bench. When he glanced back at the group, inquiry was clearly written upon the round face of the man at the desk.

"I thought I might sit in here, if you don't object," the Falcon volunteered, "while I'm waiting to see the commissioner."

As a matter of fact, he dropped confidently to a place on the bench while he was speaking. He had chosen a position from which he could command, through the open door, a view of the door behind the rail in the outer room. Also, anyone who should enter from the outside and approach the rail would cross his range of vision.

"Sure, it's okay," the man at the desk agreed, without enthusiasm, "but I guess you're gonna have a long wait. The

commissioner just got back from New York and he's kinda busy."

"I can imagine," the Falcon conceded.

He had presumed upon the reasonableness of the excuse with which he explained his intrusion, since there was no chair or bench in the outer room. But the shirt-sleeved man, whose gilded shield on his suspender denoted the rank of lieutenant, apparently expected further credentials. His eyes remained upon the Falcon, not insolently but with an inescapable expression of inquiry.

The Falcon crossed his legs and grinned narrowly, peering across at his only half convinced host. The two other men, obviously interrupted in the midst of a discussion, settled down to mild curiosity. They regarded the Falcon with quizzical expressions that somewhat matched that of the man at the desk. The Falcon included the three in the indifferent observation with which he met the silent challenge.

"I thought possibly I might find in *here*," he suggested, "one of the men I talked with over at the Manor this morning."

"*Our* men, you mean? Who was they?" the lieutenant propounded.

"Officers Denton and Byrnes, as I recall. The commissioner's men."

"Oh, yeh," the lieutenant chuckled. "You talked with 'em?"

"In a general way, that is, about the—"

The Falcon checked himself with an extravagant suggestion of caution, glancing significantly at the two other men.

The lieutenant shrugged, laughing.

"You don't need to be afraid of talking out," he encour-

aged. "These fellows are Headquarters men from New York. Came out with the commissioner. A couple more is over at the Manor now with Denton and Byrnes."

"It's a real puzzle, then," the Falcon suggested, with affected surprise.

The two men who had been so informally presented by the lieutenant laughed in throaty harmony.

"It's generally a puzzle when you find a murdered corpse and nobody happens to be around to tell you how it happened," the lieutenant contended, amused by his own spontaneous aphorism.

"Naturally," the Falcon acquiesced. "I had no particular point in seeking out the two officers here. Merely a thought of bumping into them while I'm waiting for the commissioner. My interest was aroused, of course, in what had happened during the night in the Manor."

"You mean you're a guest there?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yes—just for the week-end, that is."

"Oh, that was just routine, Denton and Byrnes calling on you. They was ordered to pump all the guests—everybody in the place. Hafta do that in a case like this. Ain't nothing in that for you to worry about, if that's why you wanted to see the commissioner."

The lieutenant grinned knowingly at the two New York detectives. Obviously he was pleased by the opportunity to impress them with his neat perception.

The Falcon suppressed his own enjoyment. No trace of it broke through his blank countenance. There had flashed into his mind one of the Sarge's often repeated bits of philosophy: that association in a police station was one of the most effective means of escaping the tentacles of a police dragnet. Police don't look for fruit to drop into their laps, was one way the Sarge had a habit of expressing it.

The Falcon decided against spoiling the lieutenant's moment of self-elation. It would be as well to let the police official's deduction stand, even if it was at his own expense. He deliberately ran the risk of subjecting himself to still further raillery by posing a blunt query.

"There has been considerable discussion about the affair among the guests, naturally," the Falcon said. "I was wondering if the police have been able to form an opinion as to the motive."

The lieutenant smiled tolerantly. He leaned back until his chair creaked, stretching his arms with a sweeping flourish that came to an end when he clasped his thick hands behind his head.

"When a man is murdered in a woman's room in a hotel," he propounded, "you don't hafta look through a dictionary for a motive. What do you say, men?"

He swiveled his head toward the New York detectives. One result was that the Falcon, completely across the large room from the trio, was forgotten in the ensuing discussion, which took on a professional twist.

"It used to be called *love* but now we call it *sex*," one of the New York men summarized.

"It's sex with a capital *S* when it happens like this," his companion insisted. "The old triangle, I'd say. Nice little party fixed up, out here where it's quiet and nobody knows 'em, and then along comes some guy that's already staked the claim and, of course, they's an argument. They used to settle things the same way out in Cripple Creek, only then it was a fuss about gold instead of fighting over a mopsy."

"Wouldn't this be put in a little different class?" the lieutenant remonstrated mildly, prompted to defend the caliber of the community he served.

"It's all the same dish, whether it's covered with cello-

phane or barbed wire," the interrupted detective persisted. "I ain't going so strong on this Lady Wadringham stuff. Maybe she just hooked the name for the trip. And I don't look at stuff through ruby glasses just because it's handed to me with a fancy label."

"But say, Marty," the other New York detective interposed, "ain't you kinda leaving out the stiff that was picked up outside the hotel and that bird Koster that skipped away from the hospital? Remember, this young bimbo that was mussed up in the lady's room had a fresh gunshot wound in his shoulder."

Marty shrugged away the interruption of his associate.

"Maybe it all adds up and maybe it don't," he argued inconclusively. "If you want to go after putting it all together, it's okay with me, Andy. For my part, I say find this bastard Stanley Matthews that was in B-9, across the hall, and we pretty near got the answer to what happened in B-10. My guess is that it was Matthews that got sore because the young squirt was jumping his claim."

The Falcon, looking on with calm listlessness, gave no sign of the keen interest aroused in his mind by the detective's mention of the name Stanley Matthews. He recognized at once that the initials were identical with those of Stokey Mullins. He decided at once that Stokey represented a shortening for an actual name of similar sound.

It was the commonest of human habits, he reflected, for a person, in adopting an assumed name, to adhere to his actual initials. The real Stokey Mullins, he decided, had registered for B-9 as Stanley Matthews.

The Falcon's mind drifted from the discussion which the detectives continued to pursue. His thoughts were busily engaged with such bits of added information as had been unfolded to him.

One thought expressed by the detective Marty, despite its crude implication, was finding a singular echo in the Falcon's rapidly shifting thoughts. He, too, would find it essentially enlightening, he was thinking, if he should discover the nature of the *claim* asserted over Lady Miriam Wadringham by Matthews, whom he had reason to know as Mullins.

He recalled the puzzling episode in the corridor outside his rooms, when it clearly was Mullins, not Carthaven, who was exercising his will upon Lady Miriam—exercising it, and winning obedience.

The ringing of the telephone bell on the lieutenant's desk cut short the animated colloquy. A moment later the lieutenant turned from his instrument and announced: "Somebody asking for Andy Downs."

"That's me," said the less intensive of the two New York detectives, moving over to pick up the instrument.

Downs spoke only in monosyllables, yet it became obvious that his interest was rising as he listened. His eyes were bright, his nostrils widely dilated when he replaced the telephone. He turned with a challenge toward his associate.

"Maybe now you won't be so damned sure, Marty," he announced, "that it's Stanley Matthews you want for the answer to the riddle."

"No? Why not?"

"That was Bill calling up from this dump up on the hill. He just buzzed the switchboard girl that was on duty last night. She remembered that the woman in B-10 called another room on the telephone pretty late last night—not long before midnight."

CHAPTER XIX

EXCHANGED INFORMATION

"DID SHE REMEMBER THE ROOM?" MARTY ASKED IMPULSIVELY.

Of the men in the room, the Falcon appeared the least interested. A casual observer would have suspected that he was not even following the conversation inspired by the telephone call.

Yet he was steeling himself for such eventualities as might be precipitated by the answer to Marty's question.

Obviously, he decided, the same switchboard operator had been on duty at ten o'clock but had failed to remember his own call for B-10 at that time. Because of the evening's festivities, ten o'clock perhaps had been a busy moment for the switchboard. The later call by Lady Miriam had stood out more conspicuously in the operator's mind.

The Falcon, in his rapid survey of impending possibilities, therefore, dismissed the danger of having the two calls connected. It also seemed to him reasonable to assume that Lady Miriam's call late in the afternoon had escaped notice.

The actual danger, the Falcon decided, was such connection as might be made between the call now uncovered by the detective and the already established knowledge of his presence with Lady Miriam in the afternoon bridge game.

Moreover, with the Sarge registered under his own name as a joint guest in B-16, the Falcon recognized as imperative

the need of averting an implication that would cause a trail of inquiry to follow his big associate to New York, where he was so widely known, even if his actual place of residence was his own secret. In not one instance in their constantly precarious career had either the Falcon or the Sarge left a trail that could have been followed to themselves.

Detective Andy Downs threw back his thick shoulders, with just a hint of swaggering importance, in that moment of delay before he answered his team-mate's question.

"Sure, she remembered the room," he confided broadly, "and it wasn't B-9, where your man Matthews was bunked. The lady, according to the switchboard girl, called for B-16. And she talked less than a minute, the girl says."

"Then we got to get after—" Marty began, jumping energetically from his chair, but his intended suggestion was interrupted.

The Falcon, too, had got up, but coolly. It was the unexpected sound of his even voice that checked the detective's excited outburst and caused the three men to face him.

The Falcon was moving indifferently toward them. His narrowed gaze was fixed on the shirt-sleeved lieutenant.

"If you'll pardon me," the Falcon said, "I couldn't avoid overhearing. I may be able to help out. At any rate, it is that very telephone call that I came here to tell the commissioner about. You see, B-16 is my room."

"You mean this woman called *you?*" Marty shot out quickly.

The Falcon granted the impatient detective a tolerant glance but his eyes returned to the lieutenant.

"I'd say it was about eleven-thirty last night that the telephone bell in the living-room of my suite rang," he proceeded, disregarding the question. "My friend Mr.

Hardy and I were sitting about, doing nothing in particular. My name, by the way, lieutenant, is Jeffries Gate."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Gate," the lieutenant acknowledged. "You was saying—"

"Yes. I answered the telephone. A woman's voice came to me over the wire. She didn't identify herself, but spoke hurriedly—excitedly, I thought. It was a refined, cultured voice, it seemed to me."

"You mean you still don't know who was talking to you, Mr. Gate?"

"As I say, she immediately began talking the moment I had spoken into the telephone, neither mentioning her own name nor asking for anyone by name. As nearly as I am able to recall she said something about finding it necessary to impose upon me, there was a sort of perfunctory apology about the *annoyance*—I recall that she said, 'my situation is difficult.' Almost immediately after that, while the woman was still talking, there was a break in the connection. Although I called into the telephone several times, puzzled, there was no further response. The entire episode occupied only seconds."

"Never heard from her again?" the lieutenant asked.

"Nothing more happened. Mr. Hardy and I discussed the incident for a moment or two, then dismissed it as one of those unhappily confused connections likely to happen across a hotel switchboard. Since we could conceive of no reason why a woman should have called our room, and as I had gathered nothing from what she had said, I gave it no further thought."

The lieutenant scratched one cheek with stubby fingers, his brow furrowed.

"Think it coulda been this Lady Wadringham, Mr. Gate?" he asked, almost apologetically. "Know any reason why *she* mighta called your room?"

"That's just the point," the Falcon volunteered with engaging frankness. "Sometimes a puzzling happening appears to explain itself in the process of subsequent events. At the time, the incident meant nothing to me. Even this morning, when your men Denton and Byrnes were with Mr. Hardy and myself in our rooms, I did not attach to it sufficient significance to mention it. Your men, as you probably have learned, lieutenant, were asking about the bridge game of yesterday afternoon in which Lady Miriam and I happened, quite casually, to be brought together."

"Oh, then you *did* meet this Lady Miriam," Marty quizzed, displaying a flash of ignited suspicion.

"So far as being invited into the card game by the unfortunate Mrs. Haldane would be construed as meeting Lady Miriam, yes."

The Falcon included all three men in the frank statement, then added to the lieutenant:

"I'm sure, lieutenant, that your commissioner has the full details of that irrelevant incident from Mrs. Haldane as well as from my statement to his men."

"Mrs. Haldane, yes," the lieutenant acknowledged. "Pretty sad about her, the major having that accident."

The two detectives fretted at the aside, but it did not escape the Falcon's alert senses that the mere mention of Mrs. Haldane had established him in the lieutenant's favorable regard.

"To get back to my very vague conjecture that caused me to drop over here to see the commissioner, or possibly Denton and Byrnes (which was my reason for inquiring about them when I came in here)—"

"Yeh, I remember, Mr. Gate," the lieutenant encouraged sympathetically.

"It occurred to me, with the aid of fairly general discussion of the affair about the Manor today, that possibly it

was Lady Miriam who called my room last night. You see, I was rather *building up* the case. Lady Miriam learned my name in the bridge game. I had gathered from Mrs. Haldane that Lady Miriam was quite alone at the Manor. If, then, she *did* find herself in some *unexpected* difficulty last night, it is not unreasonable to suppose that, on the spur of the moment, she would have made an appeal to me, apparently abandoning the decision in the very midst of talking to me. Obviously, such explanation of the incident did not occur to me last night."

Admiration beamed openly in the round face of the lieutenant. The two detectives appeared crestfallen.

"I'd say you got a swell detective brain, Mr. Gate," the lieutenant eulogized.

The Falcon grinned vaguely.

"I enjoy dabbling at it for my amusement," he said drily. "Fascinating mental exercise that makes mystery reading so popular, I'd say. Not that any of this can be of the slightest help in your problem. The younger Mrs. Haldane and I had quite a go at fencing with theories this afternoon. You know, of course, lieutenant, that the major's son and his wife have arrived because of the major's untimely death?"

"Yeh, they drove up from Asbury Park early this morning."

The Falcon swallowed that morsel of pulsating information without the tremor of a muscle. His mind was at work upon the problem that still confronted him. He had made a friend of the lieutenant but he sensed the unquenched antagonism of the other two men.

The ensuing lull was threatening to become an uncomfortable anti-climax. The Falcon was impatient to escape in good standing. There was need to reach the Sarge, who could not *guess* the interpretation to make of Lady Miriam's call.

The Falcon shrugged apologetically.

"Perhaps I owe my fascination for delving into concealed secrets, lieutenant," he said, "to my rather constant association."

"Yeh? What's that?"

"I've made a fairly steady companion of Mr. Hardy, who won an enviable reputation in the New York police department before retiring some two or three years ago."

A high-pitched ejaculation escaped from Marty.

"Don't tell me you mean Steve Hardy, the old Sarge!" he exclaimed incredulously.

"The old Sarge is right. Know him?"

"*Know* him! Hell, the Sarge gave me my first lessons—the best I ever had. There's a *real guy*—a real ace that wouldn't stand for a railroad. And it broke his heart to drop out."

"I understand the men who really knew him gave him a splendid tribute when he resigned—a ring."

"Yeh—a ring," Marty echoed.

"I knew the Sarge a little," Downs admitted. "We oughta have him and you pile in on this case."

The last was offered jocularly but the Falcon grasped it as an opening for which he had been dangling.

"I shouldn't mind a bit, nor the Sarge, either, for that matter," he said, "but the fact is that a telegram has just arrived to cut into my intended week-end here. I need to be in Philadelphia at eight o'clock tonight."

The Falcon turned his attention to the lieutenant as he added:

"That's why I came over here, lieutenant. I wanted you folks to know about that telephone call before I got away, just in case it really would have a connection with what happened, like fixing the time, perhaps."

"Sure, Mr. Gate," the lieutenant agreed gratefully. "I'll

see that the commissioner gets a full report of it. Mighty nice of you to come over. The commissioner will appreciate it."

Downs broke in suddenly.

"Hell, Marty," he exclaimed, "Bill and Pete's been waitin' for us to hook up with 'em over there. That's why Bill called me."

Marty smirked.

"Geez! Bill won't have no yap coming. We're saving him from a wild runaround on that *hot* lead he got from the 'phone moll. Wait 'til we bust in on him with the real info! He'll crack a lung."

After an effusive parting with the two detectives, the Falcon managed to linger over his farewell with the lieutenant long enough to permit their departure from the room. But alive to the pressure of time, he reached the hall a bare three strides behind them.

He saw the two men head toward the rear, to leave the building by the smaller side door. At the point of hastening to the main door at the front, he checked himself suddenly as two figures loomed silhouetted against the daylight framed in the wide entrance.

Instantly he recognized Denton and Byrnes, headed toward him.

Before either of the local detectives could have made sure of his identity, in the dull shadow of the hall, the Falcon veered toward a third means of escape.

A few strides brought him to the glass-paneled doors of Marmont's public library. He pushed through them.

His first sweeping glance discovered a cabinet telephone booth at the end of a tier of shelves. He tarried only seconds at one of the library windows. A moment later he had enclosed himself in the telephone booth, the receiver at his ear.

CHAPTER XX

ACCURATE TIMING

ONLY A MINUTE OR TWO HAD BEEN NEEDED BY THE FALCON and the Sarge, after departing from the undertaking establishment, to agree upon plans. They had concluded their discussion almost before the Sarge had got the gray roadster in motion.

The big fellow dropped his chief just before sweeping into the village plaza, at a point conveniently near the entrance of the village hall. Thereafter he nosed the little car into the underpass and brought it around into the parking circle adjacent to the city-bound platform of the railroad station.

He loitered inside the station only long enough to buy a newspaper, then emerged at the driveway side to be accosted by a phalanx of solicitous taxicab drivers. With little discrimination, the Sarge engaged a cab for the short but arduous journey to Marmont Manor. A visitor more inclined toward economy could have reached the Manor with equal dispatch by following the paved walk of the underpass, going a hundred feet along the rim of the plaza and using the tunnel-like passage to the elevator tower.

The Sarge, deposited at the porch entrance of the Manor, crossed the lobby with affected preoccupation. He lounged absently for a moment against the clerk's desk, then made known an apparently casual discovery to the young man

behind the brass studded barrier.

"Looks like that's somethin' stickin' outa B-16 box," the Sarge said.

The young man grimaced along his angular nose and pivoted stiffly toward the rack of pigeon-holes behind him.

"A telegram for Mr. Jeffries Gate," he acknowledged nasally.

"Sure! Thanks."

The clerk glanced from the envelope to the clock on a nearby pillar, then gazed vacuously into the patient face of the Sarge.

"Received fifty-two minutes ago, at two-forty-six, sir," he said. "No answer to the room-call. Sorry!"

That preliminary completed, the young man dropped the envelope midway between himself and the Sarge. The big fellow plucked it up and pried loose the lightly sealed flap. He leaned well over the desk while reading the typed lines on the yellow form. A moment later he dropped the outspread telegram on the desk.

"There's th' end of our happy little vacation in your joint," he bemoaned.

The clerk's brows drew together as the final word stabbed his sensitive ears. But his eyelids dropped until they concealed the gaze he directed at the exposed message. It lay at an angle convenient for his perusal.

Under a New York date line, addressed to Mr. Jeffries Gate, Marmont Manor, Marmont, N. Y., the message he read was as follows:

UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS SUGGEST YOU
AND HARDY ATTEND MEETING EIGHT O'CLOCK
TONIGHT PHILADELPHIA SORRY INTERRUPT YOUR
WEEKEND BUT URGENT SELPH

The Sarge allowed the clerk time to digest the telegram.

"That palooka Selph would call a man away from his weddin'," he confided, chuckling.

"There *are* people like that," the clerk admitted.

"Well," the Sarge said resignedly, picking up the telegram, "that means you got B-16 back on your hands just as soon as I pay out."

"Sorry to see you go, of course," the young man said, glancing critically at his nails. "Cashier at the second window at the right will have your bill."

"Sure. You're on a nice spot."

"Pardon?"

"Your joint, I say, is on a nice spot. Swell after you get *up* here."

"Oh! Nice of you. People rather like it, I'd say. Too bad you'll miss the chamber concert in the lounge tomorrow. Our regular Sunday afternoon feature."

"I'll be thinkin' of it," the Sarge insisted as he turned away in search of the cashier's window.

After due explanation and assurance of regret, the Sarge concluded his negotiations with the cashier. The receipted bill in his possession, he lost no further time in heading for the stairway.

The excited state of curiosity that permeated the lobby was lost upon him. He would have been willing to wager on his ability to single out half a dozen energetically engaged New York newspaper reporters, who appeared bent upon gathering a cross-section of guest speculation.

In the same sweeping survey of his surroundings, the Sarge took cognizance of two broad backs that could have belonged, he decided, only to members of the New York detective force. At the moment, the two figures were par-

tially draped over a low hinged gate that guarded access to the domain of the house switchboard operators.

A bare hint of a troubled frown crossed the big fellow's broad brow, but he dismissed it, confident that he had cleared the decks effectively. He had taken pains to leave behind ample evidence that the unexpected departure of the Falcon and himself was reasonable and outside the pale of suspicion.

The thought that there still confronted him the problem of actually withdrawing from the premises, preferably in order and with the Falcon's baggage as well as his own, the Sarge dismissed without concern. Another thought brought a satisfied grin as he moved from the head of the stairs to the corridor that led to B-16.

The Falcon, as always, he reflected, had planned adroitly. At least there would be no occasion for his chief to put in further appearance in the Manor, now infested with prying newspaper men and highly trained detectives.

He chuckled at the thought that the Falcon was, at the moment, in the one place where no detective would think of looking for him, should circumstances prompting such quest arise. It did not occur to the Sarge to doubt his chief's ability to emerge successfully from any situation that depended upon conflict of strategy.

The Sarge had moved only a few steps along the heavily carpeted corridor when he discovered a woman approaching him from the far end. At first, he could distinguish no more than a vague form, silhouetted against the daylight of the balcony opening. They were within a few feet of each other before the Sarge recognized Doris Haldane.

He glanced only briefly at the woman, but he was aware that she stared at him deliberately as they passed each other. A moment later, despite the soundlessness of her step, he

had a feeling that she had stopped almost as soon as he had moved beyond her. He suspected that she had turned to gaze after him, yet he pushed on without turning.

The big fellow's suspicion was substantiated when he was at the point of inserting his key. In a side glance he saw Doris Haldane still standing where he had passed her. Even at the instant of his guarded discovery, he was aware that she started swiftly toward him.

Before the Sarge had pushed open the door the woman's voice reached him.

"I say, if you don't mind," she called.

The Sarge straightened and faced her as she came on, but there was nothing in his smile to hint that he was aware of her identity.

"I see that you seem to be stopping with Mr. Gate," she said when she halted before him. "I had just come from knocking at the door."

Doris Haldane interrupted her own speech with a sharp catch of her breath. She was studying the Sarge closely.

"I *have* it now," she exclaimed. "I *seemed* to have remembered seeing you before when I passed you a moment ago."

The Sarge chuckled.

"My face *is* kinda easy to remember," he said. "Say you was *here* makin' a call?"

But Doris Haldane did not share his humor. She stared at him icily and her voice lost its earlier hint of civility.

"That peculiar *accident* seems quite clearly explained now," she said tartly.

The Sarge allowed a generous smile to roll across his big features.

"Yeh," he agreed broadly. "We was wonderin' if maybe that young squirt with th' kodak wasn't a friend of yours."

She colored at his ready capitalization of her own veiled admission. She had, in fact, done little more than express the thought that had crossed her mind when she assured herself that the Sarge was the man whom she had glimpsed only briefly in the Parkway Arms rotunda as responsible for upsetting the photographer. But Doris Haldane was in no mood to remain at a disadvantage. Her cool composure was restored with little delay.

"The point is," she said haughtily, "that I mean to see Mr. Gate again, at the earliest possible moment. Do you happen to know if he went to New York?"

"I guess I won't be lettin' out no secret by tellin' you that he ain't in New York. He ain't more'n a block or so from here, callin' on some friends. I just come away from him."

"Then you're expecting him to return soon?"

The Sarge weighed the new question a second or two, grinning into her emotionless countenance. Her purpose in the first query seemed obvious to him. She was trying to set her mind at rest concerning the sender of the telegram that had led to her husband's identification of Bob Dale's body, he decided. Her first suspicion, the Sarge imagined, had fallen upon the Falcon.

"Guess he won't be gettin' back here so soon," the Sarge said deliberately. "He's havin' dinner out."

"It's not yet four," Doris Haldane retorted. "You mean he won't return to the Manor before going out to dinner?"

"That's th' way it'll work out."

"But you know where he is—you could reach him!"

"If it's important—maybe."

She studied him insolently for a long moment, her lips drawn tightly.

"I don't know how much you know about things," she

said, "but I suppose it doesn't matter. There is an account between Mr. Gate and myself—it doesn't seem necessary for me to mention my name to you—"

"He'd still remember you, I guess."

She winced just perceptibly before she added:

"I want to offer him a chance to *square* that account—something he can *do* for me. *Tell* him that. But there is little time. It must be done tonight. It is something I cannot discuss with him over the telephone. That is why I was here, hoping to find him in."

"Lotta things it ain't so good to talk about on th' 'phone," the Sarge counseled. "Then you don't want him to call you up."

"Positively not. He must *meet* me. Let's see. It must be between nine and ten. But not here at the Manor."

The woman had lowered her voice, although the corridor was deserted. The Sarge waited while she pondered over her indecision.

"I have it," she said. "Tell him to meet me at the corner of the Cranton Funeral Home. Outside, I mean. I shall be sitting in my car. That is only a few blocks from here. People will be going in and out tonight because Major Haldane's body is there. I shall look for him until ten o'clock."

"If it's later than that, what?"

"I can wait no longer. It must be done tonight. And since you seem to be his handy man, he might bring *you* along."

"It's a job that would take both of us, hunh?"

She stared at him bitterly, merely shrugged in reply. She drew away a step, but hesitated long enough to ask: "Will you get the message to him?"

"Sure," the Sarge agreed, chuckling.

At that she moved rapidly along the corridor. The Sarge gazed after her, grinning. She had almost reached the turn

in the hall before he pushed his way into B-16.

To make up for the minutes that had been lost, the Sarge plunged into the job of packing. In his own bedroom the task was relatively simple. He made it even more so by tossing clothes, with little effort at precision, into his suit-case.

Tackling the Falcon's belongings in the adjoining chamber, however, he at once became methodical, taking pains with the folds in the garments as he piled them carefully into a deep leather case. When he had bared the clothes-closet and fastened the straps on the case, he opened a smaller bag and attacked the dresser.

In the act of clearing items from the top of the dresser, the Sarge was suddenly arrested. A square white envelope stood tilted against the mirror. It bore, in a flowing hand, the one-line inscription: *Mr. Jeffries Gate.*

Picking it up, the Sarge discovered that the envelope was sealed. His broad brow furrowed as the full significance of his discovery dawned upon him.

Someone had invaded the room and placed the envelope there at some time during the past four hours.

The envelope, a type that hinted feminine stationery, was flat, apparently containing only a note. The Sarge hastened through the remainder of the packing.

He had accumulated the various bags in the living-room, near the door, when the telephone bell rang. For a moment he was undecided about answering it but when it rang out sharply a second time he went to the instrument.

The Falcon's voice reached him over the wire. Quiet, calm, unhurried—yet there was an inescapable note of guarded alarm in the message to which the Sarge listened without interruption.

"Old friend of yours named Marty expecting to run into you," came the Falcon's words. "Down in the lobby *now*,

possibly. Andy Downs, who also remembers you, is with him. Don't let them cause you to *miss* the train. We have only a minute or so."

The Sarge mumbled a bare "Okay." But he had interpreted his chief's message almost before he had replaced the telephone; the Falcon had a reason for wanting him to avoid a meeting with his old buddies of the New York detective force.

The big fellow wasted no time speculating on the reason for the warning. He used the telephone to summon a porter. He paced the room fretfully until a lean, angular negro lad put in an appearance. He realized the possibility that Marty and Downs might seek him out, which would be as menacing as his own advent into the lobby.

"S'pose you could get these bags over to th' station for me?" the Sarge proposed to the porter, proffering a crisp bill as an inducement.

"Sho'! We always does that for guests," the boy said.

The Sarge waited in the room only long enough for the porter to make the length of the corridor with his burden. Then he stepped through the door.

Two square forms hove into view at the distant shadowed end of the corridor. The Sarge gave them only a fleeting side glance.

He turned toward the open doors of the balcony. Ten seconds later, grinning broadly, he stepped from the iron stairway to the ground.

CHAPTER XXI

A HEAVY SCHEDULE

LATE SATURDAY AFTERNOON TRAFFIC MESHED ITS WAY through Columbus Circle. Counter currents swirled along the wide drives of the lower end of Central Park.

Through all of it, countless human beings surged like ants to the shadowed lawns with their fringe of benches. The still blazing sun streaked at a low angle through the gaps between tall buildings silhouetted to the west.

The Sarge, sprawled in the soft depths of a leather-cushioned chair, contemplated the scene lazily from a wide ninth-floor window of the fastidious Copley-Vendome Hotel. His thick legs were stretched forward at comfortable length. His wide chin was buried in the aperture of his carelessly loosened collar.

Barely an hour had passed since the big fellow had made his agile descent from the small balcony at Marmont Manor.

Now and then, attracted by a precise, almost delicate pecking sound, the Sarge twisted his thick neck just perceptibly, to glance at the Falcon, intensely occupied.

The latter sat drawn up closely before an open carved desk. His fingers were minutely engaged, his long face bent slightly over his work.

The reader who has had occasion to follow earlier exploits of the Falcon will comprehend at once the nature of the task that now commanded his rapt attention. From a small box of many tiny compartments, he was extracting

thin slivers of finely cut steel, fitting them into a rectangular frame he held in one hand.

At one side on the polished surface of the desk, a square of heavy white paper lay ready. Soon it was to bear the imprint of an apparently typewritten note. Similar missives, on occasions, had defeated the persistent effort of both the New York Detective Bureau and Scotland Yard to determine the make of typewriter on which they had been written.

Always meticulously identical in every characteristic of both typing and paper, the notes invariably had been brief, yet of amazing portent to the newspapers that had received them and the police to whom they had been directed. It was due to that channel of occasional communication alone that the mere name of the Falcon had reached a stage of sensational prominence in both London and New York, while the actual man himself had remained intangible, elusive, fantastically legendary.

The deferential management and the appreciative servitors of the Copley-Vendome had found no reason to inquire into the private life of their highly regarded guest, Malcolm J. Wingate. His long residence in the sumptuous ninth-floor suite had been the source of wholly satisfactory relations.

The Sarge made full capital of his comfortable self-disposition until the Falcon raised up from his task. Even then the Falcon prefaced his interruption with an apology.

"You will understand, I'm sure, old timer," he drolled, "that it pains me genuinely to disrupt your meditation."

The Sarge shifted in his chair, chuckling.

"Not so bad, sittin' here, chief."

"A self-evident truism, old man. One of my happiest compensations is to see you monopolize the facilities that

particular chair has to offer. To see you in it is to be inspired with a hope for that sublime state of contentment it has not yet been my good fortune to attain."

The Sarge laughed broadly.

"Must be this chair, chief," he contended. "I was kinda wishin' for it yesterday when I was tryin' to look natural in that junk they have on th' veranda at Marmont Manor."

"Places like Marmont Manor, old man, dispense atmosphere and landscape. Those things in themselves produce a hardihood to overlook such minor discomforts as awkward wooden chairs. Languishing in upholstery does not exactly harmonize with the modern trend in interior decoration. Swank in house-furnishing today calls for an assemblage of useless antiques on the one hand and comfortless monstrosities on the other."

"Yeh, I had a sample o' that in that tea-room today. I was a long time makin' up my mind to take a chance on that chair. Like sittin' on a picket fence."

"Possibly the chair was even more outraged than you, you old son-of-a-gun."

"But *I* got th' dents, not th' chair."

"I'm beginning to suspect that you are not exactly grieved that we are back here a day ahead of time. Which brings us to the reason for our return. This *note*."

The Falcon held out a square white envelope. The Sarge shifted laboriously to the edge of his chair and reached for it.

"If you get that to the City News Bureau, old man," the Falcon suggested, "it is just possible that the Sunday morning newspapers may be able to improve their speculation concerning the events of last night in Marmont."

"It's gen'rally a help to 'em, chief, when they get word from you."

"I have rather neglected them since last winter."

"Be a kinda surprise for 'em to learn you're still in town."

The Falcon glanced at his watch.

"Not yet a quarter past five. As it happens, we aren't pressed for time. We probably can afford an hour or more for dinner when you get back from your errand. I shall prevail upon Payton to make amends for that dainty luncheon I forced on you."

"Ain't many dining-rooms in New York, chief, I'd take ahead o' th' Copley-Vendome."

"Including Marmont Manor, I imagine."

"Cripes!"

"I hope your implied aversion to our recent abode doesn't mean that you are looking forward unhappily to our contemplated return visit to Marmont tonight."

The Sarge's clear eyes opened widely.

"Then you're aimin' to take up this young Mrs. Haldane on her proposition, chief?"

"With certain reservations, yes."

The Sarge rubbed his chin.

"Funny place she picked out to meet you, don't you think? Why would it be outside th' undertakin' joint?"

"Entirely plausible, it seems to me. I suspect that she hit upon that spot as perhaps the most convenient. Doris Haldane impresses me as a thoroughly practical young woman who steers rather directly at an objective, once she sets her mind upon it."

The Sarge puzzled over that a moment.

"Got a hunch, chief, what she's drivin' at?"

The Falcon's eyes narrowed and a vague grin spread from their corners.

"I am hazarding just a conjecture, old timer," he said. "I have taken quite carefully into account the message exactly

as she gave it to you, in addition to what we were able to overhear of her peremptory injunction to her husband when he had identified the body of the mysterious Bob Dale."

"Oh, *that!* I still think, chief, she puts that *telegram* up to *you.* Maybe she didn't fall for it when I made it look like you didn't go to New York."

"I shouldn't discredit the young woman's deductive powers. But the point is irrelevant. The telegram accomplished its purpose."

"It sure went all th' way."

"Precisely. I *studied* the young woman. Immensely *fascinating.*"

"Hunh?"

"Her possibilities, I mean. Resourceful, wouldn't you admit, having that photographer on hand? She wanted something to aid her search in case I eluded her."

"She did dope that out pretty quick."

"A privilege, really, to observe her at work. Her invitation is a concession that could hardly be disregarded, on that score alone. But upon wholly another consideration, I am amazed that you were in doubt about my intention to accept it. You seem to forget that the young woman challenged my sense of obligation—that she holds me in her debt and offers me a chance to square the account. I believe you conveyed the oral invitation to me in some such wording."

"I wasn't figurin' it that way, chief. I was thinkin' of th' *other* one. Thought maybe th' Lady Miriam stuff was hotter and we'd be headin' over toward Long Island about th' time th' Haldane woman was expectin' us to show up in Marmont."

The Falcon grinned.

"So you consider the note which mysteriously found its way into our rooms during our absence the more fascinating," he accused. "Or am I to infer that Lady Miriam has implanted her wistful innocence indelibly in that sentimental heart that pounds in your chest?"

"Cripes! I ain't tried to dope out Lady Miriam."

The Falcon reached to the top of his desk and picked up the square envelope the Sarge had found on the dresser in Marmont Manor. He extracted the single folded sheet of note paper to which both of them had given earlier brief attention. He glanced narrowly again at the handwritten script, studying it while the Sarge waited expectantly.

In a flourishing hand that bore many points of feminine script, the note that covered the single outspread page read:

> Mr. Gate: I am risking this communication not only because I am in peril but because the same threat also menaces you. You did me a gallant service last night and I owe you this warning. There are things I should tell you that I cannot put on paper. Could you drive tonight to Northpoint, Long Island? The gabled house on the bayside of the peninsula, fourth beyond the school. I shall be hoping for you at ten-thirty. The house will be dark but I'll be watching, and will open the door when you arrive. It is necessary for me to take this precaution. I am bold enough to suggest this because it concerns us mutually.
>
> Sincerely, M. W.

After several long minutes the Falcon glanced up from the note and peered across at the Sarge.

"I can understand, old man," he said soberly, "that this message would make a strong appeal to your deeply rooted police instinct. It almost could have been copied from police archives. Scarcely a single element lacking to give it

intense melodrama. A fair lady in peril. Her vaguely worded, stealthily delivered call for help in the deep dark of the night. The cause of her plight mysteriously shrouded. An unlighted house facing the silent dark waters of the Sound, far out in a sparsely populated community. An amazing setting for action, danger, romance, wouldn't you say?"

The Sarge shifted, his characteristic smile peculiarly absent.

"From th' way things looked when you let her get away from them palookas last night, chief, Lady Miriam *could* be in trouble," he defended.

The two men gazed soberly across at each other for a moment while the Falcon weighed the big fellow's solemnly expressed concern.

"I am entertaining little doubt on that point, old man," the Falcon said. "If she didn't succeed in outdistancing her pursuers last night, or if they knew where to find her today, her plight may be really precarious."

"She sure laid herself open when she broke away from 'em."

"Precisely. As a matter of fact, I am not debating her danger. It is this note itself I am trying to fathom."

"Think it might be phony?"

"Let's examine it. What impressed you as its most pertinent element? I am not raising the point that Lady Miriam may not have written it. I rather think she did, so we'll begin by assuming that it comes from her own hand. What impresses you first?"

The Sarge rubbed his chin.

"Cripes, I get first off that she's in trouble and wants help."

"To me, that seems to have been made secondary—not

intentionally, perhaps, but possibly by subconscious direction," the Falcon discriminated.

"Guess that gets me in deep water, chief."

"Think a moment! Doesn't the most impelling motive of the note appear to be a desire to have me arrive in Northpoint before the door of an unlighted house in a dismally deserted locality at ten-thirty tonight?"

"Sure—that's what she asks you to do."

"So that we arrive at the next step in analysis. I am willing to assume that, from such brief impression as Lady Miriam was able to form of me, she would not expect for a moment that I would be likely to act in accordance with the implied directions in this note. If Lady Miriam wrote this note, as we are assuming, she is specifically telling me *not* to follow these directions."

" 'Fraid I don't get it, chief. If that's th' dope, why did she write it to you?"

"Which is the logical question, next in order. But let us put it aside for a moment. Let us consider first the method by which the note was delivered to me."

"*There's* anybody's guess," the Sarge shrugged, unwilling to promote a theory of his own.

"A puzzle of that kind," the Falcon propounded, "is to be approached by a process of elimination. The note wasn't mailed, therefore it was delivered in person. We may safely surmise that Lady Miriam did not return to the Manor, therefore someone acted for her—someone in her confidence, or otherwise identified with her. The note wasn't left at the office desk, nor given to a bellboy, for in either such event it would have been placed in the office mail-rack. Therefore, it was placed in our rooms by a maid, or by someone who was able to enter B-16 during our absence. We happen to be in a position to know that Lady Miriam's

erstwhile associates of last night possessed a key that enabled the late gentleman so aptly identified as Slug to make his fruitless tour of our quarters last night."

"Guess we can check him off," the Sarge chuckled. "It wasn't him that delivered th' note this afternoon."

"Excellent! For less positive but readily plausible reasons, we may check off Mullins (known to the Manor personnel as Matthews) and Koster. Either of those gentlemen would have found it embarrassing to be discovered about the Manor today."

"You can bet they was stayin' away."

"Which leaves us only Carthaven, who may or may not have been willing to risk recognition by someone who saw him last night. I am inclined to check him off also."

"Then it don't leave *nobody*, chief!"

"Except some trusted messenger with specific instructions and equipped with a key. We find it necessary to eliminate the supposition that a maid may have been the final factor in delivery of the note because, if she had found it slipped under the door or if it had been turned over to her for our room, she would have placed it on the reading table in the living-room. Therefore, the trusted messenger actually entered our rooms. From whom, would you say, did he receive instructions?"

"If you're still holdin' that Lady Miriam wrote th' note, it musta been *her!*" the Sarge risked.

"But just a moment, old boy. Lady Miriam wanted to warn me, not frighten me. The trick of directing that the note be placed on the dresser in my bedroom was aimed to impress me with a dire threat that I was really at the mercy of unrelenting pursuit. The *mistake* a crook so often makes! He crossed his own wires. The note was supposed to invite my credulity but, in arranging its delivery, the sender over-

played his hand because his uppermost emotion subconsciously dictated the supposedly ingenious threat."

"You sure read stuff between th' lines, chief. That cuts it down to Carthaven or Mullins, hunh?"

"Mullins, I'd say, old timer, remembering that it was *he* who ordered Lady Miriam to enact that interrupted episode outside our door last night."

"Cripes! Then you *don't* think Lady Miriam wrote th' note!"

"On the contrary, I feel *certain* she wrote it. Which brings us finally to your question: *why* did she write it? Are you guessing the answer?"

"Guess I better pass."

"Because your friend Mullins *ordered* her to write it. I am assuming that she devised the wording, to warn me and yet meet his approval."

The Sarge whistled softly.

"Just a punk trap, hunh?"

"Enabling us to derive the pertinent fact that Mullins has again caught up with Lady Miriam."

"Sure!"

"So that we have an obvious interest in visiting the gabled house in Northpoint."

The Sarge sobered instantly, staring quizzically at the blank face of his chief.

After a while, the big fellow eased back into the cushions of his chair and a light grin gathered around his eyes.

"From where we sit," he mused aloud, "Marmont is about a twenty-mile drive north, and Northpoint is close to forty miles east, after crossin' th' river over to Queens."

The Falcon chuckled faintly.

"You're forgetting that certain ferry boats operate across Long Island Sound from Westchester, old man."

"That *would* cut out a lot, chief, but it'd still be kinda late."

"Just about right, I was estimating," the Falcon insisted. "Unless Doris Haldane detains us unduly in Marmont, we ought to get into Northpoint reasonably before midnight."

"Oh, by that time, sure. Aimin' to make Lady Miriam kinda anxious, hunh?"

"As a matter of fact, I think our tentative schedule will allow just about sufficient time for our friends in Northpoint to abandon the notion of waiting up for us."

The Sarge laughed with recovered poise. He struggled out of his chair and began laboriously to fasten his loosened shirt-collar.

"Guess I'll be gettin' this down to th' City News Bureau," he announced.

"After which you may spare a minute or so among some of your old friends at Police Headquarters," the Falcon suggested.

"Yeh? Somethin' special?"

"I recall that you made note of one or two automobile license numbers."

"Oh, sure! Lady Miriam's and th' car Mullins and Slim used."

"If you haven't lost your influence, a nimble inquiry at the Traffic Bureau may prove helpful."

"Easy, chief. It'll be int'restin' to find out who's listed for those licenses."

"Just barely possible, old man, that it may be *extraordinarily* interesting."

CHAPTER XXII

SCAVENGER HUNT

THE SARGE BETRAYED HIS PREOCCUPIED STATE OF MIND BY the leisurely speed to which he held the gray roadster. The little car appeared disdainfully oblivious of the almost unbroken procession of less patient vehicles that passed it along the inner lane of the winding parkway.

At the big fellow's side, the Falcon seemed equally absorbed with his own thoughts. They had driven along in silence for some minutes, after emerging from Bronx Park toward Westchester, before the Sarge propounded a question.

Curiously, the question bore no relation to the potentialities in Marmont toward which they were heading, at Doris Haldane's request. The Sarge's brow owed its furrows to an engrossing riddle that had occupied the two companions during dinner at the Copley-Vendome.

It had been, as the Sarge's hypothetical question now hinted, the fruitfulness of his inquiry at Police Headquarters that had provided the burden of the dinner discussion. Advice that both of the automobile licenses about which he had inquired had been issued in the name of Stockton Mullins formed only a prelude to the results of his research.

It is not to be regarded as surprising that the Sarge should have stumbled upon a detective-sergeant who derived a measure of obvious vainglory from his mere parade of ability to speak informatively concerning Stockton Mullins. Any number of other New York detective-sergeants would

have been found equally encyclopedic on the same subject.

Stockton Mullins occupied one of those vaguely intangible roles which assume unrecorded importance in police annals. An importance that was reflected in the respectful police-station usage of the less formal appellation Stokey.

So that the Sarge had found it simple to glean general items of knowledge about Stokey Mullins. Such as, for instance, that the man had only recently emerged as a *power* of vague qualifications in Queens Borough—a power identified indefinitely with gambling and race-track affiliations, and even less definitely with politics.

There was not much to be gathered of a specific nature about Stokey's antecedents, beyond that he was understood to have had a background that spread hazily from Florida to New Orleans. But it appeared that Stokey had blossomed hardily and fulsomely in his present environs, with a substantial home in Forest Hills and, as the Sarge had been impressively informed, with *a swell summer joint* on the bay in Northpoint. The Forest Hills residence appeared, as a matter of record, in the automobile license listings.

"I'm just runnin' over in my mind what you was sayin' at dinner, chief," the Sarge began doubtfully, "and I'm wonderin', now that we know Lady Miriam was usin' one of Stokey's cars, and it looks like it's Stokey's house in Northpoint that th' note asks you to come to, if she was really tryin' to get away from Mullins last night, or was just playin' up to you so maybe you'd fall for her game later."

"I am still impressed, old man," the Falcon replied seriously, "that Lady Miriam was actually inviting me to dispose of Mullins when she insisted upon my using her revolver during that amateurish holdup."

"Yeh, that *does* give it a twist."

"You see, old timer, the note is distinctly in Lady Mir-

iam's language. And she undertook deliberately, without arousing the suspicion of Mullins, to put me on guard. She would not have needed to write, you will concede, that the house was to be dark, that my arrival was to be watched, and that the door was to be opened for me. If your friend Mullins okayed that note, as I believe he did, we have a fair index of his dullness, which coincides with his bungled performance last night."

"Sounds okay, chief. Funny him and Slim tried to put on that holdup."

"With Lady Miriam playing a part in it, I suspect Mullins was unwilling to delegate the role to Carthaven's strong-arm men, Slug and Koster."

"Sure! That's it! But cripes! Where does Carthaven figure in all this?"

"We must bear in mind, old boy, that our friend Carthaven appears to be engaged in the *social counseling* profession."

"A swell racket, I'll bet."

"Significant, incidentally, since our puzzle seems to be a skein that enmeshes exponents of widely divergent social strata."

The Sarge whistled softly.

"I guess maybe that does point somewhere, chief," he proclaimed with enthusiasm.

The troubled frown erased from his brow, the Sarge was content to smile in silence and his foot pressed a bit more effectively upon the accelerator. A few minutes later, not far beyond Mount Vernon, he swerved the car off the parkway and veered into a road that would bring him into Marmont without the need of crossing the plaza.

The little car, headlights extinguished, glided quietly to a halt in the street that paralleled the railroad tracks. It had

nosed within a few feet of the corner opposite the Cranton Funeral Home.

The widely scattered street lamps were almost completely screened by the heavy foliage of the trees that closely lined the sidewalk. The street was in thick shadow. Cars parked nearby were only vaguely outlined above the dull red glow of their tail-lights.

Tiny yellow parking lights disclosed the presence of a low squarish car drawn up to the very corner in front of the picket fence that enclosed the wide grounds of the undertaking establishment. Beyond it, a rectangular blotch of faded yellowish light, partly obscured by low-hanging branches, indicated the drawn shade of a wide front window.

From their position in the roadster, the Falcon and the Sarge faced directly the window and the parked car at the corner. While they sat for several minutes, peering into the obscure setting, they observed the arrival of visitors.

"Guess them's oldtime friends callin' to pay respects to th' major," the Sarge conjectured.

"In all probability," the Falcon agreed softly. "What do you make of the car at the corner?"

"Maybe it's *her*. Looks like it might be th' car we saw her in this afternoon."

"From what she told you, you'd expect her to be stationed about at that point?"

"Yeh, chief."

"It's still about twenty minutes of ten."

"She said not later than ten—after that, she said, it'd be too late. Want me to step over for a squint at th' car, chief?"

Before the Falcon could answer the question, the two men were diverted by interruption from an unexpected source. The staccato ringing of a high-pitched gong, in-

variably identified with an ambulance, approached from the direction of Marmont's main thoroughfare. At the same instant a brilliant flood of light broke through the shadowed street, followed within seconds by the soft roll of a huge black car.

The new arrival swept importantly to a stop opposite the gate in the picket fence. Immediately, a group of men dropped lightly from the somber vehicle and strode quickly toward the porched entrance.

"Now what?" the Sarge muttered hoarsely.

"At least the flash of those headlights answered one question. Doris Haldane was just a little slow escaping from their range."

"Cripes! I wasn't watchin'. You mean she's in th' car at th' corner, chief?"

"She was clearly revealed for just an instant."

"One or two of th' birds that got off that ambulance, chief, was in police uniform. Think they're movin' Slim?"

The sharp slamming of an automobile door attracted their attention. A moment later they discovered its explanation. They saw Doris Haldane walk back quickly from the parked cabriolet to the gate and move hurriedly to the porch. The lights of the ambulance revealed her movements.

"At any rate," the Falcon observed, "our young lady evinces an interest in the procedure."

"Yeh. Worried, maybe."

"Judging from what we had opportunity to overhear this afternoon, old man, the removal of the young man's body, I'd say, would be immensely pleasing to her."

"Sure, chief. She kinda hinted that."

"*Strongly*, I'd amend. In fact, I'd be inclined to suspect that she would have employed any available influence to

bring it about. But I doubt that the ambulance driver would have chosen the front entrance for such purpose. You may have noticed the rear drive inside the grounds—also that the mortuary at the rear is connected with a back hall that opens to a vestibuled rear door."

"That's right, chief. They wouldn't bring th' body out front."

"Not Bob Dale's unidentified body."

"*Hunh?*"

The Falcon evaded the puzzled query and suggested drily: "At any rate, the moment seems opportune for us to step out unobserved."

The two men had barely walked around the corner into the shadow of a thick tree, directly opposite the ambulance, before unexpected activity was staged across the way. A dozen or more persons emerged from the dimly lighted door, stepped down from the porch and filed out to the gate.

Outside the grounds, they scattered to various parked cars. There were some seconds of jarring hubbub, the irritating rasp of starters, the meshing of gears, then the street became uncannily still, by mere contrast, following the exodus.

The yellow glow of a ceiling bulb suddenly flooded the porch. A man stepped out through the widely open doors. The brass buttons of his coat flashed in the light.

Immediately, a spectral group was framed in the doors. Four men emerged, bearing a long black casket. Only after they had lifted their burden carefully through the gate and were at the point of sliding it into the waiting ambulance was the bright light on the porch blotted out. At the same moment, the yellow splotch at the window faded into blackness.

"Rude interruption for the major's mourners," the Falcon commented.

"Whatta you s'pose, chief?"

"Certainly not what Doris Haldane expected, old man. I see she's coming out."

The ambulance was sweeping away when Doris Haldane's shadowy form filtered through the gate. Again the street was wrapped in silence, enveloped in the vaguely streaked night.

Until the young woman had regained her car, the two men made no move. When the door of the cabriolet clicked shut, the Falcon stepped from the curb.

He approached the car from the rear, treading softly in the street. Without a telltale sound he drew up alongside the open window, where Doris Haldane sat crouched at the wheel.

"I hope I am not too late," the Falcon said.

The woman jumped as if struck. The words had been spoken not two feet from her ear.

She turned her head, yet shrank back instinctively from the window. She stared out at him, seeing him only vaguely beside the car.

"Playful of you—*damned* playful," she accused in a hard voice, "to sneak up on me."

"Then the fact that I am here at your bidding is unappreciated," he tantalized.

"Hellishly," she corrected. "Were you in time to see the show?"

He wasted only a moment in marveling at her mood, revealed by the baldness of her phrases as well as by the careless flippancy of her tone and manner.

He reflected upon the impression he had gained at luncheon: that her manner then was superficial, and his suspicion

that beneath it hovered another mood more truly characteristic. It occurred to him somewhat suddenly that now he was confronting the real Doris Haldane, freed of conventional enamel.

"You're referring, I imagine, to the episode involving the major's casket?" he queried.

"Hell, don't ride high horse. Nobody's listening. You're a clever crook, so don't play dumb. Make out like I'm a clever girl. We didn't do so well, *acting* this noon."

"So you found that discouraging! Sorry. Why did they annoy the major?"

"I guess *annoy* is a good word. They're chasing his corpse to the Marmont Hospital for an autopsy."

"Amazing!"

"Maybe. Newspaper stunt. Get a gang of reporters around and decency takes a nosedive."

"Doesn't seem quite clear to me."

"To me, either, except that one of the editors in New York got the police commissioner of this dopey hamlet on the 'phone and said he had a tip in a note there ought to be an autopsy on the major's body."

"Accommodating, the commissioner."

"A louse, if you ask me. Which has nothing to do with why I wanted to see you."

"Naturally, I'm interested."

"Nice of you to admit it, after my waiting almost an hour. Visiting hours here end at ten. You're here before ten but too late for the visitors."

"An absorbing riddle, the way you explain it."

"Anyway, the stunt's a little tougher than it would have been if the commissioner hadn't broken up the party."

"So it's a stunt," the Falcon prompted.

"A hundred thousand dollar stunt, let's put it."

"In the category of a treasure hunt, apparently."

She started suddenly at that, failing to conceal from the Falcon's sharp perception the promptness with which she appropriated it as a cue.

"Along with other things," she bantered, "you're a mind reader. A help in your line, I guess. Only this happens to be a *scavenger hunt*. Tell me! Would a *corpse* worry you much?"

"I always imagined that a corpse was beyond causing worry."

"I mean *handling* a corpse."

"I've neglected the experience."

"Hell, I'll never get anywhere with you that way. You talk like a college. Loosen your belt a little and try to remember that I'm a respectable married woman and my husband doesn't expect me to stay out all night when he isn't along."

"A normal sort of husband."

"You're telling *me!* Listen! I've got to get a corpse, and there's one in this joint, and it'll be locking up in five minutes. Get it?"

"So far."

"This is how bad I want to get that stiff out of there! I'll forget all about those bonds that dropped in your lap if you'll help me."

The Falcon could not avoid the sudden tug at his nerves when she thus blandly involved herself in at least a knowledge of the delivery of the bonds. Her bold, incriminating assertion contrasted so sharply with her careful dodging of the subject at luncheon.

It occurred to him, recalling how easily she had dubbed him a clever crook, that perhaps she regarded it of no consequence that he might form suspicions—an instant later it flashed into his mind that possibly she took it for granted he already knew all there was to know about the source and

purpose of the bonds.

For a moment he was moved by an impulse to prod her with questions that crowded into his mind. He vetoed the impulse, realizing that the effort might defeat its own purpose.

Doris Haldane misinterpreted the Falcon's hesitation—thought he was weighing her proposal.

"Are you getting it for me?" she urged impatiently. "I asked your big friend to come along with you. There's only one man on duty in there now."

"Do I understand correctly," the Falcon quizzed with affected naïveté, "that it is your assignment in a scavenger hunt to round up this particular corpse?"

"You catch on quick," she derided him sarcastically; then she added, "just *any* corpse, but this one happens to be on hand, unidentified and doesn't belong to anybody that'll set up a howl."

"It wouldn't be sporting for you not to execute the command yourself."

"That's the best alibi you can think up, is it? It wouldn't be that you're *yellow?*"

"A little sensitive about corpses."

She bent down suddenly, clicked on her dash-light and glanced at her wrist-watch. She clicked off the light and pushed open the door impetuously.

"All right, sap," she said bitterly. "I'll let you off easy and I'll *show* you something. I'm going *in* there. Maybe you'll do just a little something for me. Exactly thirty seconds after I go inside, you go up to the door and ring the bell. Put up some kind of stall to keep the man at the front door. Just give me two minutes alone inside. Then come back here to the car and wait for me."

Doris Haldane flipped the door of the car shut and stalked away from him without awaiting a rejoinder.

The Falcon, aroused by a fascination he could not suppress, peered after the determined young woman until her form was merged into the shadows beyond the gate. Then he crossed the street hurriedly to rejoin the Sarge—to issue terse instructions that electrified the big fellow into action.

It was the Sarge who, a few seconds later, mounted noiselessly to the porch and pressed the bell-button beside the door. The Falcon, a mere wraith in the shadows, slipped back to Doris Haldane's cabriolet and let himself in to the seat the young woman had just abandoned.

There was no sign from him when, not more than three minutes later, the Sarge came down from the porch and walked quickly to the gray roadster at the opposite corner. And he was still seated silently behind the wheel when Doris Haldane came up to her car.

"Long as you're sitting there," she said coolly, discovering him without emotion, "maybe you'll drive."

She slipped in beside him.

"Just around the corner," she directed. "Stop by the side gate of the drive."

He obeyed mechanically, unwilling to disturb the fascinating spell with his own voice. Only when he had brought the car to a stop and she had moved away into the black shadow of the drive did he examine the object she had dropped on the floor between them. It was a large flashlight.

She had pushed her own seat forward and left the right-hand door at the sidewalk open when she got out. He kept the softly purring engine going, waiting through the dragging seconds. The side street was without life; only here and there a bare streak of light broke through the canopy of trees.

Steeled as he was for eventualities, the Falcon was hardly prepared for the apparition that suddenly emerged from

the dark drive and framed itself in the open door of the car.

Doris Haldane stood there, holding in her arms a stark white body less than half covered by the sheet that dangled to the ground. Careless even of that scant covering, she pushed her ghastly burden to the floor behind her upraised seat. A moment later, she slid indifferently to the seat and pulled shut the door.

She turned to face the Falcon, and he suspected a defiance he could not distinguish. He was sure of it when she spoke.

"Plenty people will tell you that Doris Kendrick always did what she started out to do," she boasted. "Hope you don't mind the friend I brought along."

His perverse silence annoyed her. She had intended to shock him, as well as to shame him for what she chose to consider pusillanimity on his part. Moreover, she had grown to expect patronizing plaudits for her characteristic rashness.

"You don't think so much of my act," she taunted him.

The Falcon chuckled faintly.

"In one detail, I'm mildly speculative," he said. "I'm wondering how you managed to explain your presence long enough to toss the corpse out of the back door."

"I told the gentleman I left something in the mortuary when I was there this afternoon."

"Oh, you were there this afternoon!"

"Hell! How do you suppose I knew the corpse was there —and how to get at it?"

"Of course."

He drove the car at her direction, inveigled now to serve as her accomplice by a mere desire to witness the completion of her diabolical venture.

He turned to head back into the dark street, satisfied that the Sarge would trail along in the roadster. A short distance

on, she indicated a narrow dirt lane that led behind the garages of adjacent homes. A quarter of a mile farther along, the lane emerged into a broad paved highway.

But after barely fifteen seconds on the highway, the young woman bent over to click off the headlights and nudged the Falcon to swerve into a driveway alongside a low stucco house. The place was silent and unlighted.

It had seemed at first that they had trespassed onto the private drive of a residence but the narrow roadway bore on, in a straight line, for some distance. The car crept along, the motor barely audible.

Suddenly the white-painted pillars of an entrance-way loomed vaguely in the starlit night. An instant later the Falcon caught his breath at the unexpected scene that unfolded itself beyond the pillars.

Ghastly, in the faint light cast only by the star-ridden sky, the sepulchral monuments of a cemetery shone bleached like spectral sentinels ominously awaiting the intruders.

"Just a little way farther on," Doris Haldane whispered. "This place is only as big as a handkerchief."

"Amazing to find *this* inside Marmont."

"An old relic of the early settlers. You can't see it from any of the streets. The town keeps it hidden, but it comes in handy on Decoration Day."

"Fascinating! Quiet, isn't it?"

"Hell! What would you expect, with about two hundred years of Haldanes sleeping here?"

When he brought the car to a stop at her direction, the Falcon discovered that they stood between two small mausoleums, one on either side of the gravel drive. She sat silent, without moving, for a moment.

"I thought I heard another motor, but I don't hear it now," the woman said.

The Falcon offered no comment, but he grinned as he thought of the Sarge. The big fellow undoubtedly had been beguiled into trailing them all the way.

"Is this the goal of—of your scavenger hunt?" the Falcon queried.

"Temporary check-room, anyway."

With that, she slipped from the car. A moment later he saw her fumbling at the door of the mausoleum on the right —heard the scraping noise of a key in the lock.

She came back to the car, picked up the flashlight from the floor and proffered it to the Falcon.

"If you aren't against helping me," she said, "possibly you'll bring this. We'll need it inside."

For herself, she went briskly about the business of gathering up the corpse from the back of the car.

"I'll need a carbolic bath when this is over," she commented.

Inside the cramped sepulcher, they stood in a narrow, flag-stoned aisle between two tiers of long, shallow, shelf-like compartments, each one identified by a set of tarnished brass handles. Four of such compartments comprised each tier, as the Falcon discovered by use of the flashlight.

"You are now in the presence of the Haldane ghosts," the woman said irreverently.

She had dropped the corpse indifferently on a small iron bench that stood at the end of the aisle.

"If it wasn't for the job of pulling out one of these slabs, I wouldn't bother you for your help," she taunted.

"You seem to have your choice of eight," he suggested.

"Six of them are occupied. The bottom two are empty. The major will move in one of them in a day or two—the other is reserved for the missus. It's hers I'll have to use."

"You mean that you know *which one* is intended for the major?"

"I'll make it my business to take charge of that," she said.

The Falcon remembered the tone—he had heard her employ it with effect upon her husband. After all, he reflected, she probably would encounter no hurdles in directing the details of the major's interment.

They managed to loosen the cobwebbed, dust encrusted panel of one of the bottom compartments. While the Falcon played the flashlight, Doris Haldane picked up the slender white corpse and slid it into the partly opened crypt, stuffing the bedraggled sheet in after it.

Silently, they worked together until they had the disturbed panel back in place. Outside the mausoleum, the Falcon stood by while the competent young woman turned the big key in the lock.

"Now I need only return this key to the possession of my unsuspecting mother-in-law," she said flippantly.

"And that is to be the end of young Bob Dale," the Falcon said quietly.

She turned toward him, tense. They appeared to each other hardly more than wraiths in the phantom star-light.

"So you *knew* that—*how* did you know that?" she demanded feverishly.

"I have been extravagantly entertained, my dear young lady, by seeing a determined, clever woman go *through* with a *purpose*. But, really, you should not delay that bath."

Before she could collect herself, he turned away. He tarried at her car only long enough to drop the flashlight on the seat.

A moment later, as she still stood nonplused, Doris Haldane heard his light crunching footstep fade along the gravel drive.

The Falcon had in mind that the gray roadster and the Sarge probably were obstructing the solitary exit from Marmont's abbreviated city of the dead.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN INFORMAL VISIT

THE MYRIAD LIGHTS OF *Playland* CAST A PHOSPHORESCENT haze against the feebler sheen of the starry night. From the pile-driven pier that jutted into the Sound alongside Oakland Beach, the effect was that of a yellowish vapor, spectral against a spaceless background.

At the end of the pier, a ferry-boat bobbed restlessly against the piling, slapped by the swells of the tide. The splintery gang-plank swayed like a breeze-blown hammock as the Sarge eased the roadster over the groaning timbers between the guard-rails. Neither he nor the Falcon got out of the car when it had drawn up almost against the barrier at the forward end of the passage.

There was yet ten minutes to wait for the scheduled eleven o'clock departure. The Sarge had timed the drive from Marmont to Rye with careful calculation.

Passengers, drifting by twos and threes from the Saturday night throng at Westchester's carnival center, came aboard and sought places on an upper deck. Another car lumbered into position behind the roadster. On a gust of land-driven breeze, the amplified peals of an organ concerto swept across the impatient surf, dying out after only a moment.

Two men took stations at the gang-plank as the little craft blasted a warning to straggling groups. A bell sounded feebly from the bowels of the boat. As if corroborating the

pilot's timepiece, the yellow haze above *Playland* faded to a bare smudge, signalizing the end of a holiday.

The ferry seemed frail against the expanse of pounding water. A tiny broken rim of blinking lights was barely discernible on the distant Long Island shore. But the craft nosed spunkily into the rolling Sound, and went about its purpose with contempt for the resistance of the tormented swells.

Similarly complacent, the little boat rode easily through a maze of anchored craft in the harbor at Oyster Bay, after a bare fifteen minutes lost in the crossing. The gray roadster purred in readiness the moment the barrier was slid aside.

Skirting quickly through the town that still flashed an evidence of Saturday night activity, the Sarge bore to the east before reaching the main North Shore highway. He was able to avoid that favored artery of travel, except for a brief stretch now and then, until he was well beyond Huntington.

Past the business center of Northpoint, which showed little life beyond a lighted restaurant and a filling-station, the roadster had the road to itself as it turned due north into the narrow peninsula. The strip of land seemed hardly more than a finger pointed rigidly between Sound and Bay. There was only the solitary highway between the scattered homes that faced one or the other of the two waterfronts.

A last-quarter moon peeped lazily above the rumbling horizon of the Sound at the moment that a square-cut structure at the right caused the Sarge to bring the roadster to a halt.

"Guess this is th' school, chief."

"Obviously, old man, with that solemn entrance."

"Gonna have moonlight!"

"The old fellow warned us fortuitously, I'd say. Pull up at the far side of the school. That will leave the car in shadow for at least three hours."

"Okay, chief."

With disregard for curb and lawn, the big fellow maneuvered the roadster into the suggested shelter, without the aid of headlights.

"Fourth house on th' bay side," the Sarge muttered when they stood on the ground.

"We'll be able to count them from the rear as well as from the front," the Falcon said, proceeding at once to make his meaning clear.

With the Sarge in tow, the Falcon struck out at right-angles to the highway, opposite the school building. A trudge of perhaps two hundred yards through ankle-high grass and weeds brought the two men to a narrow strip of sandy beach at the water's edge. They turned north, following the beach.

Due to the hump between the two shores formed by the roadbed, the faint rays of the barely risen moon were not yet reaching the slope toward the bay. Nevertheless, the Falcon set a brisk pace.

It proved simple to count the houses as they went along, as in each instance they encountered a definitely wider stretch of beach, as well as skeleton structures built out into the water. The homes were spaced at generous intervals.

When they halted at the water's edge behind the fourth house, they encountered facilities that impressed them at once as more elaborate than those which had marked the other three residences. The beach itself was in splendid state and widened to a considerable slope.

At the top edge of the sandy expanse, a circular shelter

was built up off the ground. It was connected directly by means of a concrete walk with an imposing pier, against which a small launch lay bound.

Beyond the shelter, toward the house, the ground rose in a velvety terrace to a widespread lawn. A tier of shallow stone steps led from the shelter to a cement path.

From the shelter, the two intruders looked ahead at the wide, shadowy hulk of the house. The edges of three immense gables were now silver-tinged by the light of the moon that shone against them on the opposite side. In their present position, the Falcon and the Sarge were directly in the deep shadow of the house itself.

No faintest blink of light showed within the irregular outline of the house. No sound broke the stillness except the toneless restlessness of the bay.

They moved beyond the shelter, mounting to the cement walk. With one accord, they stepped to opposite sides of the narrow pavement and, walking abreast, strode forward warily on the thickly carpeted lawn.

The paved walk ended at the head of an encased steps. Descending, the two men found themselves in a square cemented areaway, set under the rear of the house.

Feeling about in the dark space, the Falcon encountered an open doorway in the left wall. Satisfied by the silence, he made cautious use of his small pocket flash. Beyond the opening, the light revealed a well-appointed bathhouse. Two tiled shower compartments were at one side. A tall, broad cabinet was built in against the opposite wall. With the aid of the flash, the two prowlers were able to avoid a long bench in crossing to a closed door in the far wall.

Listening a moment, the Falcon turned the knob. He found the door unlocked. Pushing it open slowly, he assured himself that the space beyond was without light.

The bathhouse obviously occupied a part of a tall basement. The room in which the men next found themselves seemed bare. Cautious investigation established it as no more than a wide passage between the bathhouse and an ascending stairway. The latter was lightly carpeted and the men were able to mount it without noise. A closed door blocked their progress when they had reached a small, pitch-black landing.

The Falcon again employed his flash, the Sarge pressed closely behind him, alert, his right hand deep in a side pocket. Once more an unlocked door rewarded the cautious turning of a knob.

Obviously this means of entrance to the house, accessible only from the water-side, was regarded as secure against intrusion. Or possibly, the Falcon reflected, recalling the small launch at the dock, it had been only recently used. He estimated that the time still was some minutes short of midnight.

The hall into which this second unlocked door admitted was not directly lighted, but it was bathed in grayish shadow. The source of the vague light became apparent when the two men had moved noiselessly into the hall and closed the door behind them. From beyond a turn in the hall, forward toward the middle of the house, was reflected indistinctly a suffused, apparently dim illumination.

The place was hauntingly still, the atmosphere noticeably close. To the two men who paused, listening intently, the house conveyed an impression of being unoccupied, except for sparsely placed furnishings visible from where they stood.

Not more than a step apart, the two men moved warily toward the turn in the hall. They found themselves in a widened space, constituting a passage between two large

rooms on opposite sides of the house, the open doorways showing both of them completely dark.

The secret of the vaguely reflected light unfolded itself. It was no more than a silvery shaft of moonlight that penetrated the hall almost horizontally through a tall frosted transom at the front.

Coming from the deeply shadowed rear hall, the two men halted abruptly in momentary apprehension as the space before them seemed enveloped almost in the brightness of day. Defined in clear outline was the base of a wide stairway that led upward with a sweeping curve to be lost in darkness.

Heavily napped rugs covered the floor. Like silhouetted wraiths, the two companions crossed to the stairs. Two other open doorways led off the forward hall but the entire floor offered no sound to reward their intent listening.

A heavy carpet muffled their steps as they ascended, abreast, feeling their way guardedly as they penetrated the deep shadow beyond the second wide curve of the winding staircase.

In the upper hall, pausing to accustom their vision to the darkness, the men stood shoulder to shoulder, scarcely breathing as they strained to catch some possible tell-tale sound.

The Falcon judged that they stood approximately at the middle of the second floor, in a hall of unusual width but obviously shut off, by rooms, from the front of the house. After some moments, it was possible to form vague impressions of door-frames, but the closeness of the hall indicated that no door was open.

Feeling along a balustrade at the head of the stairway, the Falcon discovered that a narrower flight led to a still higher level. He was at the point of turning back to probe

in the opposite direction along the near wall when a noise that shattered the deathly stillness of the house set both men suddenly rigid.

A telephone bell had run sharply in the lower hall. In the bare instant that preceded a repetition of the ringing, a click from the opposite side of the hall reached the galvanized men faintly.

The Falcon, tugging significantly at the Sarge, intuitively sought the narrow ascending staircase. They had barely concealed themselves, three or four steps up, before a door midway across the hall was pulled partly open, admitting a shaft of vague light to filter toward the rear of the wide passage.

The broad form of Stokey Mullins, enveloped in a silk robe, emerged from the lighted aperture. The telephone bell continued spasmodically.

There was a light click at the rear wall of the hall. Instantly a small shaded lamp revealed a chair and stand. Mullins dropped heavily upon the chair and picked up an extension instrument.

His voice reached clearly through the silence of the hall to the two men hidden not more than thirty feet distant.

"Hello—no, he didn't show up—no, he won't come now, any more. It's midnight!— I let them go about eleven-thirty. Nothing here to eat, you know. Closed this place last week and the servants are at Forest Hills— Yes, I'm here alone—oh, sure! I still have *her* here— I don't know; was just thinking it over. I've still got the launch out back; was expecting to use it—yes—what's *that?*— No! I haven't seen it—*what?*"

After the second emphatic query, Mullins sat through a long silence at the instrument, listening. When he spoke again, his agitation was evident.

"You mean they come right out and call it *murder?*—

oh, not definite—maybe it's just a wild newspaper yarn for an aftertheater *extra*—what bastard *asked* for the autopsy? —who?—*the Falcon!*—sure, I heard about him, but who *knows* anything about him? How the hell does he get in this?— Who?— *Gate!* Hell, I'm afraid you're right, and we played dumb enough to think we could tease him here with a soft note—*of course, Gate is the Falcon!* Nobody else could throw that stuff at a newspaper and get the police busy right away. He'll have the goods about Slim, too, and he's had a pretty good look at us, Carthaven, so we have to play for a quick *out*—well, let me think a minute."

Mullins sat drumming nervously on the small stand. The two men on the stairway, having discovered that the light only vaguely reached the opening of their hiding place, long ago had descended to the bottom step and stood peering cautiously at the seated figure.

"Well, the woman's in the way, now, Carthaven," Mullins said into the telephone, "unless she'll listen to reason. Where are you?—Well, you could make it in an hour; I'll wait for you. We can't get anybody else in this, now. You brought too many in it already— Okay about that. I'll see that you get paid after this blows over, but I've got to act fast—sure, I'll pay you myself, no matter what happens to the bonds; I guess we kissed them goodbye. But we can still play the same party— Okay, I'll look for you in an hour."

Mullins slapped the instrument on the stand as if the ordeal had exhausted his energy. He sat for a moment or two, scratching his head.

He was at the point of rising from the chair when the telephone bell in the lower hall rang out sharply again. He grabbed quickly at the instrument.

"Hello—who?—Oh! What are you calling *me* about at this time of night?—From a *police station!*—Now listen to

me and *get* this, understand? You don't say a word— Sure, I'll see that you're *sprung* the first thing in the morning, even if it *is* Sunday—yes, I'll get you out, and there'll be a *grand* for you, understand? But you keep your trap shut; you don't know a damned thing— Okay, the Third."

Mullins replaced the telephone vigorously. He waited barely a second before he had it again at his ear. He dabbed viciously at the dial. There was a brief wait before his voice again echoed through the otherwise silent hall. This time he spoke with a snap, importantly, sparing of words.

"This is Mullins. You've got to get right *on* this, Bogholt. The coppers have picked up a mug named Philip Koster. Holding him at the Third. No *charge*. Just a *pick-up*. But you've got to *spring* this bird before seven in the morning.—Before seven, without fail. Get old Wasley out of bed to take bail—yes! And listen, Bogholt! Fix him up with a grand and a ticket for Chicago, and have somebody see that he gets on the train, understand?— That's up to *you!* Get the *dough!* Now *do* you or *don't* you?—Okay. Bring me your bill Monday."

This time Mullins banged down the telephone and jumped up from the chair simultaneously.

He strode forward in the hall with vicious determination. But he did not pause at the door from which he had appeared. He walked beyond it to the next door.

The Falcon and the Sarge had withdrawn two steps upward, completely within the shadow of the stairs. They were not more than a dozen feet directly behind Mullins when he flung open the door and pushed through into a dark room. A moment later there was a click and the room was flooded with light.

The two men on the stairway caught their breath at the

sight unfolded to them through the open door.

From a high-backed upholstered chair in the far corner, Lady Miriam Wadringham looked up, startled by the intruder's approach. It seemed apparent that the sudden dash of light had aroused her from a dozing slumber.

Slumped in the deeply cushioned seat, she appeared frail in the loosely gathered, frilly negligee that only partly covered a light gown. Her eyes stared widely at Mullins, but the expression was one of defiance rather than alarm.

"She's tied," the Sarge whispered to the Falcon.

An instant later, when Mullins had advanced another step, the Falcon also observed that Lady Miriam's bare arms were bound, above the elbows, to the carved sides of the tall chair.

Mullins stopped squarely in front of the woman, blocking her from view through the door. His thick mumble was heard but his words were indistinguishable. He bent down over the woman.

A sharp, half suppressed scream escaped from Lady Miriam.

The Falcon had stepped across the hall. His taut figure was framed in the doorway.

"I shouldn't do that if I were you, Mullins!"

The Falcon's words were crisp. Mullins raised up and turned as if bitten. His eyes bulged at the unperturbed figure in the door. Instantaneous recognition gripped him in that startled moment.

"How did you get in here? What are you doing here?"

Mullins fumbled with an effort at bravado as he asked the questions. He backed away from the seated woman while regarding the ominously blank countenance of the unexpected guest.

"I happen to be here at Lady Miriam's invitation, indited with your full approval, you may remember," the Falcon said icily.

He moved into the room as he spoke, his hands loosely in his side pockets.

Mullins sidled around him like a stalked animal at bay. The open collar of his shirt was exposed between the lapels of his loosely tied robe. His shuffling tread disclosed that he was wearing house-slippers.

The Falcon, affecting an insolent disregard of the man, continued toward the bound woman, who stared at him in speechless surprise.

Mullins was measuring his opportunity. With sudden decision he raced for the open door.

Without bothering to look around, the Falcon chuckled lightly. He gave no more sign than that as he completed his calm walk to the chair and attacked the cords that bound Lady Miriam's arms.

"He'll be back with a gun—he's desperate!" Lady Miriam warned.

Not even a grin acknowledged the barely audible words of the woman. The Falcon remained calmly at his task until the full-throated voice of the Sarge, from the hall, aroused him.

Safely out of the Falcon's presence, Mullins had raced for the nearby room he had so recently deserted. But he proceeded no farther than the door. His immediate purpose was arrested when his startled eyes discovered the huge figure of the Sarge, spread in insolent comfort in the chair in which he himself had been reading when interrupted by the telephone.

Mullins tarried at the door only long enough to see the

Sarge raise himself from the chair. With a nauseating realization that recovery of his coat and traveling bag was out of the question, the baffled master of the premises dove in final desperation for the stairway to the floor below.

It was then that the Sarge, impelling himself into the hall, called out to his chief. The Falcon was almost instantly beside him.

"He's chased downstairs, chief, but most of his clothes is back there in th' room. Want me to smoke him out?"

"His clothes, eh? They may be important, old man. Especially the pockets."

Even during that bare moment of indecision, the churning rumble of a madly started motor jarred up to them from the basement garage. An instant later, the impetuous dash of an automobile from under the side of the house divulged itself.

"Cripes!" the Sarge muttered. "He's beatin' it in his robe and slippers."

"One moment, old timer."

With that bare injunction, the Falcon stepped hurriedly into the room from which he had been summoned. He intercepted Lady Miriam in the act of reclaiming her disarrayed apparel from a chair beside the undisturbed bed. She turned toward him, stoically possessed.

"Sorry," he said perfunctorily, peering at her indifferently, "but we must be moving at once."

"You're leaving me—*here?*"

"I was only suggesting that you dress and gather your things hurriedly."

She reddened under the cold correction of her error.

"Thank you for coming here so marvelously," she said. "You will want an explanation—"

"It will have to wait. We happen to be trapped on a narrow neck of land. It will be to our advantage not to linger."

"This time, *really*, I'd like to leave it entirely to *you*," she said seriously.

"Thanks. As for getting out of this narrow alley in a car, I'm tackling that alone. My thoroughly capable associate will make amends for our host's failure to take you on that intended trip in his launch."

She looked at him quickly, troubled, suddenly oblivious of her dishabille as she took an alarmed step toward him.

"There are things I *must* say to you," she pleaded. "Don't you realize what I owe you?"

When he checked an intended interruption, peering quietly into her impassioned eyes, she added, turning deadly calm:

"You won't deny me the opportunity to retrieve my character in your eyes?"

The Falcon half turned from her before he said: "If you will trust our big friend tonight, I'm sure he will manage a meeting for us tomorrow."

Lady Miriam had to be content with that. The Falcon stepped quickly from the room.

"You haven't lost your dexterity with a launch, have you, old man?" he accosted the Sarge. "From the brief survey in the dark, I'd say your friend Mullins has a fairly commendable craft tied up at his pier. We heard him intimate over the telephone a moment ago that it was ready for service."

"What you aimin', chief?"

"In this splendid moonlight, I thought possibly you could maneuver a reasonably enjoyable journey down into the East River and land somewhere convenient to Manhattan.

Lady Miriam will be ready to go aboard in a moment."

"Sure, I could make it to Pelham, easy."

"Excellent, old man. You'll see that Lady Miriam is properly lodged."

"Sure, chief. But *you!*"

"We have a car alongside a schoolhouse. It really should not be discovered there in daylight."

"You're goin' that way *alone?*"

"I'm aiming to take along with me, old timer, such exhibits of interest as our friend Mullins may have left behind."

On the sand beside the pier, the Falcon waited until the launch moved confidently away against the silvery surface of the inlet. Then he turned to retrace the distance the Sarge and he had come along the waterfront.

When he had regained the gray roadster in the shadow beside the school-building, he drove slowly over the now moonlit roadway, studying the houses he passed. Most of them were dark—many of them, he suspected, had been abandoned by their summer residents.

He had covered perhaps half the distance of the narrow peninsula before his scrutiny was rewarded—before the lighted windows at one side of a wide residence provided proof of its occupancy. A moment later, the Falcon discovered two parked automobiles in the side driveway of the place.

He halted the roadster, stepped quickly to the road. In the light of the moon he was able to find the aluminum mail box, set upon a post a few steps from the curb. He employed his pocket-flash cautiously—only long enough to make sure of the name lettered on the box: *Albert L. Richter.*

Back at the wheel of the roadster, he shot the low car forward at a smart speed. Mere seconds brought him to the

neck of the peninsula, the curve into the main highway of the business center just ahead.

Suddenly his path appeared completely blocked by a group of blinding headlights, singly apart from one another but all focused squarely against his windshield. His foot found the brake—the car choked its speed—ground to a stop.

The Falcon discovered a motorcycle instantly beside him —two others stood pulsingly near the side of the road, six feet away. The khaki uniforms of the highway patrolmen were revealed in the moonlight.

"Where you from?" the officer beside the roadster demanded.

"New York," the Falcon answered.

"Sure, New York, but what I mean is where you coming from right now?"

"Oh! Pardon me. I've been visiting friends."

"Friends, hunh? Maybe you still remember their names."

The Falcon chuckled lightly.

"Why shouldn't I, officer? I've been visiting with Al Richter. Hope I'm not violating the town curfew."

The policeman, oddly, failed to resent the flippancy. Instead, he called across to his fellow-officers.

"He's been up at Al Richter's," he said; with significant emphasis, the Falcon thought.

One of the other men braced his motorcycle and walked over to the car.

"Of course," he said. "Anyway, we're looking for a car with three people. This gentleman's *alone*."

"Sorry," the first officer apologized to the Falcon. "We're looking for a car coming down this way and they ain't *many* this time of night. Sorry we bothered you."

"Yeh," the second officer echoed.

"I'll be going along then, if you say so," the Falcon suggested.

"Sure; good luck," the first officer said with warmth.

"Thanks," the Falcon returned.

Ten seconds later, skimming past the darkened stores of the town, he grinned at a thought.

"I must have selected the mayor of Northpoint for my alibi," he mused.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONVERGING FACTORS

COMMISSIONER BALDWIN'S WORST FEARS WERE FAR EXceeded by the Sunday morning editions of New York's energetic journals.

Marmont's sensitive pride had not been spared. In fact, as was gathered earlier from the overheard telephone conversation of Stokey Mullins, one of the more impatient newspapers had seen fit to herald the Haldane sensation in a midnight extra edition.

The Falcon, as may already have been suspected, had by his own intervention moved the Marmont story several notches forward in journalistic tempo.

First, by the mere fact of his note, which reached all New York city editors through the City News Bureau. Each newspaper accorded the brief communication a place of spectacular prominence, framed in rules on the first page. As presented, it appeared:

> Suggest the Marmont Police Commissioner order autopsy to determine cause of death of Major Haldane and not be beguiled by theory of accident.
>
> The Falcon.

As would be supposed, the mysterious murder divulged by the unidentified body found in Lady Miriam's room

was made secondary to the death of Major Haldane. The journals dealt with the latter broadly as murder, despite the fruitless first efforts of the promptly ordered autopsy.

But to the Falcon himself was accorded primary distinction in the journalistic effusions of many pages that sprang from the vast news material Marmont had produced in a single day.

One newspaper observed that the Falcon, apparently bored by Manhattan's stupid underworld as a playground, had chosen for a reappearance, after some months of retirement, to alight explosively in the very garden spot of exclusive Westchester County, leaving behind at least three corpses as a memento of his phantom-like visit. Attempts to account for the range of victims ran the full gamut of journalistic conjecture.

This facetiously flattering observation appeared in one journal:

> The Falcon, still an intangible wraith so far as the police on both sides of the Atlantic are concerned, has the unique habit of setting the mystified authorities on the right track through the medium of the press. The disappearance of Senator Sneed would have remained unsolved, except for one of the Falcon's characteristic notes.*

Of Lady Miriam, the newspaper accounts disclosed that she had arrived from London early in the week, had taken rooms in the Ashley-Belgrade, and had been absent from that splendid Manhattan hotel since Thursday.

Far from implicating the young woman in the murder that had been unfolded in her room at Marmont Manor, prevailing reportorial conjecture was that the Falcon prob-

* Recorded in *The Falcon's Prey*.

ably had found it convenient or strategic to kidnap Lady Miriam in the promotion of his major plan.

Brief dispatches cabled from London appeared in the journals, the following being a fair specimen:

> London, Sept. 12.—Lady Miriam Wadringham, mentioned in news dispatches from New York, is understood to have sailed for a visit to New York two weeks ago.
>
> Lady Miriam is a younger daughter of the late Earl of Illingstaire. Her maternal grandfather was Carleton Bins-Morton, who founded Bins-Morton Chemicals, Ltd.
>
> As the culmination of a youthful romance, Lady Miriam Illingstaire became the bride two years ago of Gerald Wadringham, a young commoner of social prominence and promising governmental position. The latter was reported absent from London for the week-end holidays and could not be reached for an interview.

It was apparent that the theft of the corpse from the Cranton Funeral Home had not been discovered in time to enter into the morning news accounts.

For more than an hour the Sarge had been fumbling through the heap of Sunday morning newspapers. He had succeeded in getting them well scattered on the floor about the huge chair in which he sat luxuriously sprawled.

For the third time within the space of a minute, the big fellow glanced forlornly across at the Falcon. As if surrendering hope, he shifted his position in the deep-cushioned seat and gazed resignedly through the nearby window upon the mid-day panorama of Columbus Circle. He was little impressed. His eyelids dropped lazily.

The Falcon sat before his desk, bent over an open book, oblivious of his companion's poorly concealed restlessness.

Three or four other thin volumes lay open upon the desk. It became apparent that the Falcon was engaged in checking one book against another, as he pored intently through page after page, taking up the various volumes in turn.

The Sarge blinked guiltily when the Falcon's voice aroused him.

"Just restin' my eyes, chief," he insisted. "Been gettin' a heavy dose from all these papers. I wouldn't be much good right now with that fine print in them books you been studyin'."

The Falcon grinned.

"Books like these, old man, could not possibly be diffused with that enviable capacity for comfort you so masterfully exemplify every time you connect with that chair."

"Guess maybe not, chief."

The Falcon's face sobered, and there was a hint of achievement in his tone.

"I've been able to arrive at a most fascinating deduction," he said.

"I could see th' way you was at it you was gettin' somewhere."

"Beginning from the very meager results thus far accomplished by the autopsy, as we find them discussed in the newspapers, my research of the last hour has brought me to a definite goal."

"I was thinkin', chief, even if Major Haldane *was* poisoned, wouldn't it be kinda hard to find evidence of it after th' body was embalmed?"

"You should know your own State of New York better, old timer. Mercuric chloride, arsenic and zinc chloride formerly were used as embalming agents. But murder by poison became such a popular diversion that the State found it necessary to forbid use of those poisons for embalming

purposes, in order that autopsies might have a better chance to disclose the poisons that caused death. The embalming fluid used today is no more than a temporary hardening preservative, composed largely of formaldehyde—itself a poison but causing no conflict with the usual evidences of fatal poisons."

"But they don't seem to be sure th' major was poisoned, chief."

"The Marmont toxicologists hurriedly summoned for the autopsy were under a handicap, old man. It is obvious that the Marmont police are regarding the major's death as a possible murder solely because of my note to the newspapers suggesting the autopsy—not because of concrete evidence yet developed."

"Reads that way."

"The police found the major's body about nine-thirty, and assumed that he had fallen and broken his neck some time after dark. The autopsy showed nothing external except bruises from the fall. In approaching a theory of possible poisoning, the police are entirely in the dark as to the element of time."

"Sure, chief."

"Now as to the internal evidences. The autopsy showed the bronchial tubes collapsed, the trachea contracted, veins of the neck distorted—general evidences of strangulation and respiratory congestion, all of which could be accounted for by a broken neck. The stomach and intestines contained no trace of poison, and not much could be learned from the contents of the arteries and veins after embalming."

"Don't *look* so much like poisonin', then, does it?"

"From that showing, no. Unfortunately, the police of Marmont have no reason to suspect that Major Haldane may have died at a little after four-thirty Friday afternoon,

and that death possibly was caused almost instantaneously, four or five hours before his body was tumbled down among the rocks below Marmont Manor."

The Sarge's eyes brightened.

"I can see you're headin' somewhere, chief," he encouraged.

"You will remember that I saw the prostrate body of the Major not more than thirty minutes after he had walked away from the veranda," the Falcon recounted. "As we had reason to suspect during our brief visit with him, and as newspaper statements now indicate, Major Haldane apparently had been in perfect health and had said nothing to hint the contrary."

"Looked okay to me, chief."

"Two factors impressed me when I bent over the silent figure. First, extreme dilation of the pupils of the eyes. Second, an unpleasant odor. I identified it then as possibly a heavy perfume. I am convinced now it was the odor of bitter almonds."

The Sarge's thick mouth dropped open at that unexpected statement. He was too puzzled to frame an intended question.

"The point is, old timer," the Falcon went on, "my research in these books has led me to the conclusion that only one poison could have caused the major's death, in the manner indicated, and leave no mark upon the lips or mouth, or a trace of itself in the stomach."

"Only one, hunh?"

The Falcon crossed his legs and squinted thoughtfully across at the big fellow.

"A fascinating poison, old man," he said. "It may not have occurred to you, but there are remarkably few poisons that cause immediate death. Exclude the deadly gases, and

the list is a bare half dozen. Count out those that leave at once discernible tell-tale marks behind and we get down to one—*hydrocyanic acid.*"

"You mean that don't leave no scars in th' mouth, chief?"

"Not when the victim inhales barely a single whiff of its vapor through the nostrils."

"And *that* would cause death?"

"Startling, isn't it? Yet, we find the word of eminent toxicologists in support of that astonishing claim. Hydrocyanic acid is described as the most rapid poison known. The acid itself will pass through the unbroken skin and cause immediate fatal poisoning. Inhalation of the vapor of the anhydrous acid instantly paralyzes the respiratory nerve centers, causing asphyxia, collapse—instant death from strangulation. It leaves behind the vague symptom of an odor of peach-stones or bitter almonds."

The Sarge shifted nervously.

"How could anybody get hold of stuff like that, chief, or handle it?"

"That's what confines our problem, old boy. This ingenious method of murder is not likely to be employed widely for two reasons. First, the pure acid, exposed to the air, causes the fatal vapor, but no one could procure in a drugstore, even with a doctor's prescription, anything stronger than a two per cent solution. Even the chemists' lists contain nothing above five per cent. Second, only someone with an expert knowledge of the extreme hazard could handle pure hydrocyanic acid without virtually committing suicide. Men who work with it wear masks and rubber gloves, and adopt utmost precautions."

The Sarge rubbed his chin.

"An' still you think, chief, that someone gave th' major a whiff o' that stuff in Lady Miriam's room?" he asked.

The Falcon's long face was immobile as he responded cryptically: "The odor, the absence of marks, the instantaneous results. It may just possibly be more than a coincidence, old timer, that the major's neck was broken before his body was produced for discovery. Hydrocyanic acid, I neglected to mention, centers its attack on the *medula oblongata.*"

"Th' *what*, chief?"

"That very important nerve center at the back of the neck, between the brain and the spinal cord."

"Cripes! *Does* look like it ties up! Who coulda pulled off a job like that?"

The Falcon grinned good-naturedly.

"Suppose we check up, for a moment," he suggested, "on everyone, so far as we know, brought directly or indirectly into contact with Major Haldane from the time he left the bridge game until I discovered him on the floor."

The Sarge hunched forward.

"Ain't many, chief."

"We'll cover the ground thoroughly," the Falcon said patiently. "First, there was the negro bellboy who came to the table to summon the major to the telephone. We still are ignorant, incidentally, of the origin and nature of of that call. Next in order is the young man who delivered to a bellboy, as you ascertained, the penciled message that caused the major to go directly from the telephone booth to Lady Miriam's room. About that individual you were able to obtain only a vague, indifferent report that he was a *young fellow.*"

"That was all, chief."

"Exactly. We list next the bellboy to whom you talked, who took the message from the young man and delivered it to the major just outside the telephone booth. After

which, we come to your friend Mullins, who may have been listening from B-9 or actually waiting in B-10."

"Sure. Guess he had keys to both rooms."

"Ten minutes elapsed, then Mrs. Haldane left the veranda, and it appears that she went to Lady Miriam's room, if my deduction about the torn card is correct. But it is to be borne in mind that she preceded Lady Miriam by not more than thirty seconds, and that brings us to Lady Miriam herself. It was perhaps twenty minutes later that I saw her dash from B-10 to B-9. And *there* is a circumstance to *remember*, old timer. Lady Miriam's flight was impetuous, as if something had just occurred to excite her—so impetuous that she left the door of her room open. And when I arrived at the door a second later, only the silent figure of the major occupied the room."

"Looks kinda *black* for her."

"Let's *see* if it does. Suppose she murdered the major. Would her own premeditated act have caused her to dash excitedly from the room, leaving the door open with the evidence of her crime exposed? Remember, Mrs. Haldane had been in the room presumably, had left it, and later telephoned Lady Miriam, asking if she had seen the major again."

"Yeh. That gums it up."

"Well, there's your problem, you old son-of-a-gun. One of that list I've just given you, it seems reasonable to assume, very expertly wafted the vapor of hydrocyanic acid into the unsuspecting nostrils of Major Haldane. It had to be someone who was able to get possession of a small quantity of the anhydrous acid and also understood how to handle it. Who was it?"

"Cripes, chief! Ain't you leavin' out Carthaven an' Slim?"

"I *suspected* you might be worrying about them. As

for Slim, I followed him immediately from the veranda and did not encounter him. Your friend Carthaven has an impregnable alibi."

"Yeh?"

"I'm afraid we overlooked it at the time. Remember, it lacked some minutes of five o'clock when I made the discovery in Lady Miriam's room."

"Sure, chief, but—"

"And your friend Carthaven, you will recall, was wearing dinner clothes. He carried no baggage when he departed. Which proves quite eloquently that he did not arrive at Marmont Manor until sometime during the evening. I rather suspect that, upon summons, he arrived, with Slug and Koster in tow, at about the time I was keeping my auto engagement with Lady Miriam."

"But we was thinkin'," the Sarge persisted, "that it was Carthaven that was s'posed to be in th' bridge game and get th' bonds when Slim delivered them."

"Which merely illustrates, old man, that theories should always be held open to amendment."

The big fellow ran his thick fingers through his hair, his brow furrowed deeply.

"Guess this fancy murder dope's got me stumped, chief," he bemoaned. "Looked easy until you sprung this stuff about hydrocyanic acid."

"I'm afraid you're forgetting the first rule of crime detection."

"What's that, chief?"

"Look for the motive. Who would have wanted to murder Major Haldane, and why?"

The Sarge looked at the Falcon quickly, a hint of understanding in his eyes.

"*You* got that far, chief?" he queried.

"I am approaching it, old man. At least, I am eliminating all but one of the list I just enumerated because they appear to me to have had no motive."

The soberness of the statement left the Sarge winded. The very manner of the Falcon, however, discouraged further prying. To mask his gnawing curiosity, the Sarge poked idly among the littered newspapers on the floor. Suddenly he jerked a section of one of the Sunday picture tabloids from the heap.

"Cripes, chief, here's somethin' we missed!"

"What?"

"Picture of Doris Haldane!"

"The tabloids never miss a bet on pictures. Any text with it?"

"Just says under th' picture: 'Former Doris Kendrick, heiress of copper millions, drawn into Marmont sensation surroundin' supposed murder of Major Haldane.' Oh, here's a note, says story is on page twenty."

"You did so well with that, old timer, suppose you give me the story."

"Okay, chief."

After a moment of feverish shuffling of pages, the Sarge read from an item that appeared as follows:

COPPER HEIRESS CREEPS
OUT OF LONG OBSCURITY

—

For the first time since she became, about two years ago, the bride of Captain Farragut Porter Haldane, dragging that gallant young scion of the illustrious Haldane forebears precipitately out of the army, the former Doris Kendrick, who inherited the millions of her grandfather, Copper King Kendrick, returned to public attention. Only incidentally, however, since she

did no more than drive up from Asbury Park to Marmont with her husband because of the death (now hinted as murder) of the latter's father, Major Eustace Porter Haldane.

Doris Kendrick will be remembered for her kaleidoscopic escapades which rallied the less conventional younger set of a few years ago devotedly into her social menagerie. At the height of her lavish antics, soon after the copper fortune had come actually into her gentle control, she paralyzed the bluebloods of Newport with a reputed $50,000 outdoor pajama breakfast, building up part of the expense by importing a force of Borneo warriors, in native costume, to act as servitors for the occasion.

Bored ultimately by these shores, the ebullient Doris set sail in her private yacht for other waters, and the cables were heavily taxed by running accounts of her exploits. While London served temporarily as her playground, it was rumored that she had prankishly been wedded to one of Britain's foremost young men (identity never disclosed) during a carnival aboard her yacht. The rumor was never verified and finally was dissipated as legend.

Surprisingly soon thereafter, however, the young woman came home, amazingly sedate for one of her spirit, and presented society with a last but dignified shock by becoming Mrs. Farragut Porter Haldane. Her marriage marked her retirement from a mode of living that long had been grist for the gossips.

"Guess I didn't do so well with some of them words," the Sarge apologized, when he had recovered his breath after the reading.

"I was able to follow you," the Falcon compromised.

"Don't seem to 'mount to nothin'. These tabloids sure get a kick outa dishin' up old hash."

"Not exactly germane to the news of the day, I'll admit, and yet, in this specific instance, I find the warmed-over hash extraordinarily acceptable."

"Yeh?"

"Getting thus more intimately acquainted with the young woman, I can understand that her impetuous escapade with the corpse last night was merely a mild index of her natural capacity."

"It does kinda show that, chief."

"Beyond which, that dissipated rumor of her supposed British marriage offers fascinating conjecture."

The Sarge looked up quickly.

"You think, chief, that—"

"I am inclined to suspect, old timer, in view of otherwise inexplicable complications that have crowded upon us in the last two days, that mention of the apparently hushed rumor may open an avenue to interesting conversation when we call this afternoon on Lady Miriam. I believe you told her to expect us at about four o'clock?"

"Yeh, chief. Figured she'd want to sleep 'til about noon, after I got things fixed up at th' Sentinel Hotel. Told her she better order her meal an' not show up outside her room."

"Registered under what name, old man?"

"Claire Adams. Just *come* to me."

"The name just occurred to you, eh? It couldn't be that you've been packing that name Claire around with you as a cherished memento of Claire Lafare?" *

The Sarge grinned sheepishly.

"Guess I *ain't* never forgot th' girl, chief," he confessed. "She come *through* like one in a million."

* Figured prominently in *The Falcon's Prey*.

"Yes. I recall that you voiced some such appraisal at the time. Fine little girl, Claire Lafare. But to get back. The enterprise of your very estimable tabloid helps me out in one other particular."

"Yeh? What?"

The Falcon fumbled in a compartment of his desk. He turned back toward the Sarge, holding a letter.

"I had about dismissed, as of no aid to us, such papers as I found among the hastily abandoned effects of your friend Mullins last night. This letter interested me as a puzzle, nothing more. But the brief glimpse you've just given me into the elaborate background of Doris Haldane serves to inject at least the suspicion of a point into the letter."

"It does, chief?"

"Suppose you have a look at it."

The big fellow squinted at the closely penned single sheet the Falcon passed to him:

> Mullins:
>
> I'm dashing this off so that you may refresh your memory with it occasionally. I'll appear to support your threats but remember my warning. Don't carry on with them if your plan slips. I'll stop at nothing to prevent the truth from coming out. Besides M. and D., only you know what happened on the boat. Whatever you do, you must stop short of divulging it. Quite as an aside, it so happens that I am always prepared for eventualities.
>
> C. I.

"Th' stuff in th' tabloid about Doris Haldane, you say, chief, helps you figure out this letter?" the Sarge queried.

"Curiously, the handwriting is suspiciously similar to

that on the pieces of card I recovered from Lady Miriam's room at Marmont Manor," the Falcon volunteered, evading the question.

"Cripes! That would warm it up some, wouldn't it?"

"It occurred to you, no doubt, old man, that one or two expressions in the letter have a vague British flavor—forms the average American would not be likely to use."

The Sarge glanced again at the letter he held.

"Only th' initials *C. I.* signed to it," he observed.

"Incidentally, it appears that the young woman now awaiting our call at the Sentinel Hotel actually *is* Lady Miriam Wadringham. You may recall the initials *M. I.* in one of the rings in her bag. The cables make it clear that Lady Miriam formerly was Miriam Illingstaire."

"Right initials, sure."

"Yet her answer was enigmatic."

"What answer, chief?"

"When she and I were in the tap-room of the Manor. Something led me to suggest to her that possibly she was *not really* Lady Miriam Wadringham. She replied that if I knew *the complete answer* to that, I'd find it possible to be conservative in my conclusions."

"Complete answer, hunh?"

"I have an idea, old man, that we now possess just enough parts of the puzzle to get that answer from her this afternoon."

Confusion overspread the Sarge's broad countenance but he sallied bravely: "Oughta be int'restin', chief."

CHAPTER XXV

TRAGEDY ANEW

THE FALCON PERMITTED LADY MIRIAM TO DIRECT THE CONversation. He did little prodding. Her assurances that she felt deeply obligated to him he accepted with mild acknowledgment.

"I think last night was to have been the end for me—if you had not come," she said.

But she offered no explanation to account for the dilemma in which he had found her. He asked for none. She went on to condemn her own stupidity for having fallen again into the clutches of Mullins.

"It did not occur to me that I would be in personal danger," she said.

"Then I misconstrued your expressed desire Friday night to depart from Marmont Manor alone," the Falcon suggested indifferently.

"I *did* want to get away alone," she corrected hastily. "I was frightened at the prospect of what further might happen after—after what had just taken place in my room."

She made no more specific reference than that to the murder of Slim. But she added, a moment later:

"I had nowhere to turn. I drove to Mr. Mullins' home in Forest Hills—waited outside until he came along. He said it would be unsafe for me to return to my hotel. I put up there for the remainder of the night. I want to be frank with you. Late Saturday afternoon he drove me to

the place where you found me."

"Late in the afternoon! Then the note—"

"He had me write that before we went there. I was sure you would understand I had been *forced* to write it. Yet, somehow, I was glad to be able to send word to you, although I then had no idea of the depth of Mr. Mullins' purpose."

The Falcon found vague enjoyment in musing over her recital. It seemed to him she took for granted his knowledge upon many points. As, for instance, the identity of Mullins and his home in Forest Hills. It was equally obvious that she chose to pass over many gaps—that there was a point beyond which she did not intend to go, in taking him into her confidence.

The room in the Sentinel Hotel in which they sat facing each other was pleasant enough—reasonably commodious—only two floors above the street. It was apparent that the woman had made preparations for departure. Her closed over-night bag was at the wall beside the chair in which she sat. Her light coat and hat lay on the neatly made bed. The furniture tops were bare—no evidence of occupancy.

The very bareness of the room suggested the question he asked, when she paused, apparently at the end of her recital.

"Have you seen today's newspapers?" he queried.

"I haven't had them, but I have had an inkling of what they contain," she responded. She stopped short, her dark eyes widening with apprehension.

The Falcon received nonchalantly the enigmatic admission. The blank face bore no evidence of the thought aroused.

"So she has had communication with the outside—with *whom*, I wonder," he mused.

The mere hint of possible duplicity brought the Falcon to a decision. His voice did not rise when he said:

"Of course, you know, Lady Miriam, that you are suspected of murdering Major Haldane."

She stared at him in amazement.

"How *can* that be charged to *me?*"

"You didn't imagine that it wouldn't be learned the major's body had been removed from your room."

"I did *not* murder him."

She looked at him squarely when she said that.

The Falcon crossed his legs, grinned vaguely.

"In that event," he said, "you would know who did."

"I don't know *that.*"

"Or have a *strong* suspicion."

"I can only repeat to you, Mr. Gate, that I don't know *who* murdered Major Haldane."

"Even though you were alone in the room with him when he fell to the floor."

She looked at him defiantly, composed.

"He was dead when he fell," she said solemnly.

Her eyes did not leave his inscrutable countenance. He studied her, somehow finding it inescapable that she was speaking the truth, hiding only her suspicion. Lady Miriam broke the silence.

"So you have known that much all along, as I feared, intuitively, when you were in my room Friday," she said.

He decided upon another approach.

"Doris Haldane is not precisely kindly disposed toward you," he said. "That affair of two years ago still rankles her."

There was just an instant when her self-possession tottered under that speculative shot. But she managed an excellent recovery.

"Doris Haldane," she said evenly, "would lose as much as I if the truth were revealed—even more, if that is possible."

"And the unfortunate old major was at the point of revealing it," the Falcon hazarded drily.

"What do you mean? How can you *assume* that?"

There seemed genuine surprise in her question, as if his remark had awakened a train of thought even new to her own mind.

"Someone who had access to your room in Marmont Manor must have had a reason for stilling the major's lips," the Falcon argued.

She turned suddenly quizzical, frowning at him.

"I thought your crossing of my path only an accident. What is the basis of your extremely deep interest?"

He regarded her coldly.

"If it will relieve you," he told her, "your presumption is correct. As to your question, you'll have to be satisfied merely that I am interested, and happen to be not far from the truth."

"I regarded you as friendly."

"I never make friends with falsehood or concealed truth. It had occurred to me that you might need friendly intervention, to make it possible for you to return to London and Mr. Wadringham *in good order*."

"Have you come along as just someone else dangling a threat over my head?"

He grinned at the intentional insult.

"I was inclined, being impressed to the extent that you have told the truth," he said calmly, "to suspect that you *deserved* to return to London in good order."

The rejoinder stabbed Lady Miriam. Consciousness of her own gross blunder showed in her large eyes. She rose,

crossing toward him. He got up.

"I've wronged you miserably, against my every instinct," she pleaded. "I didn't really believe what I implied. Believe me. Forgive me, please. It is futile for me to attempt to fathom you, as it was Friday night."

She rested one hand on his shoulder, breathing close to his cheek. Warmth had sprung into her voice—such a change as the Falcon had marveled at when they sat alone in her coupe, before driving away from the Manor Friday night. But he stood now without sign of response to her appeal, her fervor.

"Would I be wrong again," she said only above a whisper, "if I were to assume now that you had intended that *intervention* in my behalf?"

The Falcon shrugged lightly. His lips did not part. He offered no encouragement.

"Remember that first vague confidence I felt—I expressed," she said quietly, not moving away. "I find it so natural to want to cling to you—to depend upon you. Please believe, I shouldn't indulge at a time like this in empty phrases. I know you *aren't* Mr. Gate, but it doesn't matter. After all, I am alive only because you responded to that note so competently. You're an extraordinary man—more than a man. And about me—I want you to have more than a half-truth. Circumstances have so miserably misrepresented me to you. There will be less pain for me to tell you the truth."

She drew in her breath, almost as if some inescapable torture assaulted her. She turned to face him squarely, her eyes glowing widely into his own.

The Falcon stood rigid, unmoved, the faint perfume of her copper hair trickling under his nostrils.

"Until now," Lady Miriam said, "I've never met anyone

with whom I've cared to share my devastating secret. You asked me Friday night, I believe, if I am really Lady Miriam Wadringham. I'll let *you* judge."

She turned from him slowly, sadly, crossing back toward the chair she had abandoned. Before she reached it, there was a sharp rapping on the door of the room.

Lady Miriam, after only the briefest glance at the Falcon, crossed to the door. She had no more than opened it when a young man stepped in lithely, without ceremony. He was tall, slender, little more than a youth.

His hunted, anxious expression betrayed itself as his eyes swept the room nervously. When they encountered the Falcon, the intruder stopped short, but after an instant the suddenly tightened lines of his face softened into just a thin, half apologetic smile.

"Sorry," he mumbled, still looking at the Falcon, turning toward Lady Miriam before he added, "I thought he was Mullins."

"*Mullins!* When you know I came here to *escape* from him?"

There was an intimacy in Lady Miriam's softly spoken remonstrance.

"But I've asked him to come here," the young man argued. "He's about due—a minute or two, I'd say."

"*Carleton!*"

Lady Miriam's exclamation was a tortured cry of pain. As if suddenly faint, she leaned back against the closed door.

"I trusted you when I let you know I was here," she added. "How could—"

"It's the only way," the young man hurled at her defiantly. "I *must* have it *out* with him. I could not have hoped to meet him alone, except by suggesting that he

would find *you* here. I had to act a cad. But there's time. You can clear out before he gets here."

Lady Miriam stared, overwhelmed, at the frantic young man.

The Falcon, standing back momentarily ignored, peered from one face to the other, turned rigid at his discovery. Separated by less than the width of the door, the two faces emphasized their startling similarity.

The wide dark eyes, the prominent high cheek-bones, the long chiseled countenance that ended in an almost pointed chin—all of those features of the high-strung newcomer made him appear almost a replica of the strained, anguished young woman who faced him. He lacked perhaps two years of her age.

"You've messed things horribly, Carleton," Lady Miriam accused.

"I'm *righting* it, don't you understand, sis?" he shot back furiously. "I brought this on you. I'm taking it over."

Lady Miriam suddenly remembered the Falcon. She wheeled to face him, an almost deathly pallor in her cheeks. She struggled, tortured, to find words.

A thick knocking thudded upon the panel of the door, immediately behind Lady Miriam. She stood a moment, irresolute, but it was obvious to the Falcon that she was mastering herself, now that a crisis impended.

The young man gestured to her, surprisingly collected after his outburst. His signal was easily translated. It asked for a moment of delay. Granted that moment, he moved lightly to a corner, where he would be behind the door when it was opened.

The Falcon looked on, calmly fascinated, stepping toward a closed door in one side wall of the room. He

ignored Lady Miriam when she turned to answer the summons. His narrowed eyes were riveted upon the electric young man.

The latter had drawn out a pair of rubber gloves—was stripping them onto his hands. He accomplished the task quickly with practiced skill.

A moment later he had snapped a band around the encased right hand, under the thumb. It held in place a soft, fluffy, minute pad, inside the rubber-covered palm. Just a faint powdery cloud filtered from the pad as it was snapped in position.

Even as Lady Miriam was engaged in turning the knob of the door, the young man, standing rigid against the wall, added yet another detail to his clock-like preparation. The encased fingers of his left hand crept into a waistcoat pocket. They emerged, holding a thin, nickeled, oddly pointed vial.

Stokey Mullins entered confidently through the opened door. His insolent gaze rested no more than an instant upon Lady Miriam. His intended greeting died on his lips.

Mullins had discovered the Falcon at once—recognized him. There was one breathless moment while Lady Miriam pushed the door shut.

The Falcon made no move. Yet every nerve was tense, every muscle in command. The knob of the door near which he stood was only inches from his right hand. Yet he appeared to be standing there indifferently, his hands hanging freely at his sides.

Mullins moved quickly to capitalize his apparent advantage. His right hand swept inside his coat. Yet, since he had not yet spoken at all, he could not deny himself an exultation.

"So the boy really *did* fix things up for me here," he

exclaimed incredulously.

His eyes remained fixed upon the calm face of the Falcon. His hand emerged slowly from under his coat, the butt of an automatic pistol showing first. He moved slowly, as if deliberately prolonging the moment.

There was a barely audible gasp from Lady Miriam as she caught sight of the weapon, then beheld the Falcon standing a dozen feet away, defenseless. That seemed the signal for which the young man, pressed back against the corner wall, had been waiting.

The Falcon's unwavering gaze caught the deft movement —just an instant when the vial was pressed against the powdered pad—then it was slipped back into the waistcoat pocket as the right hand clenched itself into a fist.

There was scarcely a sound to announce the youth's lunge—not until he had fastened himself about the thick shoulders of Mullins—not until the rubber-encased right palm, now outspread, lay pressed tightly under the nostrils of the larger man—only then did the young man's unleashed cry assail the dramatic silence.

"Dammit, Mullins, I *warned* you what I'd do—and now—"

The words broke off. The automatic cracked hoarsely against the youth's slender abdomen. But even before he sagged to the floor, the gun had dropped from Mullins' grasp, which had suddenly gone limp.

The big man writhed in an appalling paroxysm of choking. His eyes rolled, stared glassily. He clutched frantically at his throat but, an instant later, his arms dropped limply. He collapsed to the floor, a choking gurgle sounded from his throat, then he lay still.

Lady Miriam started toward the younger man, hunched on the floor, griped in agony. She had not seen the Falcon

pull open the heavy door at his side. But she halted at his sharp command.

"Come back from there," he called to her. "It will *kill* you."

She looked around at the Falcon, mystified, surprised by the open door and the view of a room beyond it.

The agonized young man rolled his eyes toward Lady Miriam.

"He's right, sis," he said feebly, the words half choked. "This stuff would finish you. Don't come near me. I'm done for, anyway."

While he spoke, he made a valiant effort to close his right hand upon the death-soaked pad but he was not equal to the effort.

Lady Miriam shrank back toward the Falcon, yet unwillingly.

"Carleton! Why—" she gasped.

The youth glanced weakly at her, struggling for speech.

"At any rate," he mumbled slowly, "I've shut off Mullins—just like I shut off the major, poor devil, after Mullins told him everything. Carthaven told me today they were going to use the old lady to play the game all over. I was sick of the rotten game, sis— I tried to work it another way. Forgive me, old girl. It's *right* now. I *finished Carthaven* after he told me. Now *nobody's* left to tell. Not even me—nobody, sis—"

His last words trailed. There was a final devastating convulsion, his eyes rolled back, the pointed chin dropped until the mouth hung open. The lines of torture erased themselves from the long face—it became chalky as the lank body twitched in the last gasp of life.

"My unfortunate young brother," Lady Miriam moaned, turning with marble pallor toward the Falcon.

The sudden noise of footsteps outside the door of the room seemed scarcely to reach her. She obeyed almost mechanically when the Falcon pushed her gently through the open door into the adjoining room.

There she encountered the sympathetic countenance of the Sarge. No word was spoken by either of them but she waited beside the big fellow submissively until the Falcon appeared, carrying her bag and her coat and hat.

The Sarge moved to the door, closed it noiselessly, locked it against the room into which death had so tragically stalked.

When they stood, listening, at the corridor door of this room of refuge—which the Sarge had provided under no impulse greater than characteristic precaution—they could hear pounding upon the door of the room that had just been abandoned. They waited for unmistakable sounds that the door had been flung open—the room invaded.

"I'll take care of clearing the way, old timer," the Falcon said.

To Lady Miriam, he added: "If you will accept the protection of our good friend, we shall get along famously."

"Whatever you direct," she answered.

The Falcon spared a moment to marvel at her amazing recovery. She looked into his narrowed eyes frankly, trustingly.

"*Set*, old man?" the Falcon queried.

"Okay, chief," the Sarge responded. "Only a couple steps to th' stairway, without passin' th' other room."

"Give me five seconds," the Falcon specified, opening the door into the corridor as he spoke.

It is of little consequence to this history to record that the Falcon consumed the major part of the allotted five seconds to dislodge an inquisitive hotel-operative, who ven-

tured to dispute departure. That hotel attaché, apparently aware that the two rooms had been assigned *en suite* to presumably a brother and sister of the Adams clan, had remained posted in the corridor while his co-workers had plunged directly to the source of alarm occasioned by the discharge of Mullins' pistol.

The Falcon so effectively dispatched the temporary impediment that the Sarge and Lady Miriam were enabled to reach the nearby stairway without being either heard or observed.

Not until they had descended beyond view, however, did the Falcon abandon his post of vigilance. Past a turn in the corridor, he signaled for an elevator.

CHAPTER XXVI

RETURN DELIVERY

THE LONG LIMOUSINE PURRED LAZILY IN THE EARLY SUNday night traffic of Central Park. Hunched carelessly at the wheel, the Sarge scarcely noticed the winding turns as the car threaded its way in a general northerly direction.

Against one corner of the wide back seat, the Falcon sat comfortably disposed in the deep cushions. Lady Miriam had abandoned her own corner—had edged toward her enigmatic companion—until, with the swaying of the car, her knee brushed occasionally against him, or her elbow dropped into the crook of his arm.

During most of the four hours that had elapsed since the Sentinel Hotel had been left behind, the Sarge alone had been host to the fugitive woman. Only after night had fallen —when the Falcon had completed a task that had occupied him at his desk in the Copley-Vendome—had the Sarge brought the car around to an appointed rendezvous to take on his chief.

The Falcon had been listening, somehow contentedly soothed by such bits as Lady Miriam chose to volunteer—of herself, of the Haldanes, of the tragedies that had stalked after her, first in her room in Marmont Manor, again in the Sentinel.

Stray bits, they were—no connected story, except as the Falcon amused himself in fitting them together. But he had not prompted her—nor led her on. It impressed him that

she found it easier to open her thoughts to him, in the obscure shadow of the limousine, where she could see his long, serious countenance only in vague outline.

It was when Lady Miriam mentioned her brother, Carleton Illingstaire, that the Falcon interposed his first question.

"He bore his grandfather's Christian name, didn't he?" he asked politely.

She showed no surprise. She was beyond being amazed at his baffling store of information concerning her. It no longer annoyed her.

"Yes, grandfather Carleton Bins-Morton."

"From which I imagine your grandfather may have taken him on—put him into his chemical laboratories."

The shadows hid Lady Miriam's unarrested start.

"Carleton was there for a season or two, yes, until he decided upon the States last spring," she said. "Here, you may not know, he made himself known by using Carleton as a family name. He had broken with our older brothers. The name Illingstaire, he wrote me, simply would not click in New York. I doubt that three persons here knew him except as Mr. Carleton."

"So *that* would account for his most unusual adeptness with particularly vicious poisons," the Falcon said, persisting in following the main point.

"He made poisons a perverse hobby— I'm afraid it became a mania."

"And, of course, being in your grandfather's place, he was able to possess himself of poisons in their most virulent state —for his experiments."

The Falcon caught the bare shudder that escaped the woman's lips before she answered.

"In point of fact," she said, "he kept a devilish supply— devised vials for them. You saw—"

"Yes," the Falcon interrupted when her voice broke. He waited a moment before he asked:

"If you don't find my curiosity repugnant, what brought your brother to your room in Marmont Manor Friday?"

"There is no longer reason why I should evade any question you ask me," she said. "I've been expecting you to ask questions. I want you to know, *really—all of it.* You're forgetting, I'm afraid, that I've taken you up—thrown myself rather on you."

When she paused before continuing, the Falcon toyed with the thought of the ground she already had covered without returning to the disclosure she had been at the point of making—the baring of her *devastating secret*—when her brother's impetuous arrival interrupted them. He wondered, vaguely, if she considered her brother's gasped reference to it—his boast, in a last breath, that there was *nobody left to tell*—a padlock which now not even she would disturb.

"Believe me," she said, "until you and I together, this afternoon, heard what Carleton said, I could not have sworn that he *was* in my room—even in Marmont. I may have suspected."

"You knew only that Major Haldane had been murdered in your room."

"I knew only that Major Haldane fell dead upon the floor of my room when I opened the door of my clothes closet."

Even in the shadowed interior of the limousine, the Falcon suspected that he saw the huge shoulders of the Sarge, above the back of the driver's seat, jump in surprise when Lady Miriam's statement trailed to him.

"That, I assume, was *after* Mrs. Haldane had gone from your room," the Falcon suggested.

"You knew that *she* had been there? Somehow, I sus-

pected there were things you knew, when you were in my room, although it did not appear reasonable that you could. Mrs. Haldane had been gone not much more than a minute when I opened the closet door to take out my bag."

"You mean she had not encountered the major—in your room?"

"No. She was spared that."

"Although she was not spared the knowledge that the reason he failed to return to the veranda was that he had gone to your room presumably to await you."

Lady Miriam tensed.

"She could have had no such knowledge," she said almost severely.

"I'm afraid I don't follow you," the Falcon said ruthlessly.

"For you to presume that Major Haldane and I had an appointment to meet in my room is unfortunate."

"But the card that *took* him there?"

"The *card?* I don't understand."

"I'm referring, Lady Miriam, to the card Mrs. Haldane tore into small pieces while she sat in your room, smoking a cigarette."

"You have a way of almost making it seem you were present in the room. Now that you mention it, I do recall seeing Mrs. Haldane tear a card—idly, it seemed to me at the time. She had put her bag on the stand, taken out her cigarettes. I thought she had taken the card—some memo, possibly—likewise from her bag."

"Then you hadn't observed the card on the stand when you returned to your room, before Mrs. Haldane arrived."

Lady Miriam stirred impatiently.

"Mrs. Haldane and I entered the room together."

"Together?"

"You will remember I left the veranda immediately after

her. I caught up with her in the lobby. She appeared at a loss, finding no evidence of the major. We walked to the porch door and looked out. Crossing back to the stairs, we went up together. Her apartment was locked and she was without a key. The bell brought no response. She seemed suddenly very tired, worried. I proposed that we walk around to my room and rest. We could 'phone from there, I suggested."

The Falcon was peculiarly impressed.

"Did she telephone?" he asked.

"I left her alone a moment while I stepped into the bathroom. When I returned to the room she said, oddly resigned I thought, that there would be no need to telephone."

"Since you were not aware of it, Lady Miriam," the Falcon volunteered, "while you were in the bathroom Mrs. Haldane discovered a card on the stand beside her chair, where Major Haldane obviously had abandoned it. The card bore a message purporting to have been penciled by you to the major, asking him to await you in your room for some urgent purpose."

"Mrs. Haldane has reason to suspect me of *that!* It is monstrous. Who could have written it?"

"Your brother, Carleton Illingstaire."

Lady Miriam clutched the Falcon's arm when he said that.

"Weren't you *expecting* your brother?" he asked.

"Yes. He was to have joined in the bridge game. Just before Mrs. Haldane went to get you, there was a message from him that he would not come. You were able to gather from what he said this afternoon that he was engaged in some devilish work. It concerned Major Haldane. But it did not contemplate murder."

"His participation in the bridge game was to have been in promotion of the scheme?"

"That *you* probably can answer, Mr. Gate," she said, not pointedly, yet leaving little doubt of her implication.

That *he*, instead of Carleton Illingstaire, had received the package of bonds, she appeared to regard a sufficient hint of her meaning.

"But your brother abandoned that part of his plan," the Falcon prodded.

"You must understand that he did not intend to appear as my brother—merely as a friend. But he feared, at the last moment, the strong family resemblance would be noticed. He already had mentioned an alternative plan."

"So that he actually arrived in Marmont Manor, even though he avoided the bridge game?"

Her response to that was unmistakably candid.

"My brother knew the number of my room—I was to leave it unlocked for him—but except for his own statement this afternoon, I have no knowledge that he was in Marmont Friday," she said.

"Mullins *could* have been in your room when the major went there, could he not, Lady Miriam?"

"Yes—he *could* have been there."

She made that confession quietly, but she added with vehemence:

"Please understand, Mr. Gate, I've had a part in this only because Stockton Mullins threatened to destroy something dearer to me than life. I was compelled to permit him to pretend that I was demanding a hundred thousand dollars from Doris Haldane. He directed her to send that amount in bonds to a friend who was to be with me in the bridge game I had contrived to have Mrs. Haldane arrange. For reasons of caution, the name of the supposed friend was not disclosed; which accounts for the mistake that was made. Because of that mistake, I was compelled to go through the

pretense with you in my room—forced to act as a decoy to lure you to that lonely road. Surely you must have understood when I attempted—"

"Yes," he interrupted. "I gathered your feeling toward Mullins. He wanted the blackmail payment, even though he already had betrayed both Doris Haldane and you to the major. He did that when Major Haldane found him in your room. The major, if I judge him correctly, threatened righteously to *expose* the secret. That is why your brother, also in the room, killed him—killed him to silence him for *your* sake. That much is clear. What isn't clear, Lady Miriam, is *why* your brother sent the major to your room. You mentioned that he had an alternative plan. Perhaps that would offer an explanation."

Her disappointment, when she responded, was obvious.

"I don't know the nature of the alternative plan," she said. "You heard my brother mention Carthaven. They had discussed another plan because they didn't trust Mullins. Don't you see, the three were aligned in the extortion, yet each was distrustful of the others. Mullins set to work on the plot soon after my brother came over here. Carthaven, with his alleged social counselor bureau, was enlisted to make representations to my husband that resulted in my trip here, and to arrange for my meeting the Haldanes."

"And it was your brother who supplied Mullins with the necessary information?"

"Stockton Mullins already had it."

"Why would he have been likely to impart it to Major Haldane, when his main purpose was to extort money by merely *threatening* to expose it?"

"I can understand why he would have done that," Lady Miriam said with sudden tensity. "Stockton Mullins hated Doris Haldane, and his impulse to ruin her, whatever that

might do to me at the same time, may have been even stronger than his desire to profit from extortion. He was pretending to her that *I* was making the blackmail demand, although for himself he could have been planning to avenge the cause of his hatred."

"There was a *cause?*"

"Let me tell you what it was that my brother, depraved as he may have been, was unwilling to have bared, possibly not because of a deep love for a sister, but because of a sense of family honor that *had* to be in his blood. It goes—"

The Falcon checked her.

"To seal that secret forever, Lady Miriam, your brother committed indiscriminate murder and sacrificed his own life. I would not ask you—"

"I want you to know it," she interrupted. "I shall be taking back with me an indelible recollection—of you—and I shall be happier to know that you understand."

The Falcon waited while she seemed to be gathering courage for an ordeal.

"A little more than two years ago," Lady Miriam began, "Doris Kendrick was amusing herself by dazzling certain younger sets in London with her wealth and spectacular conduct. Business relations of earlier years had established a bond between her grandfather and my grandfather, which explains why we met. In meeting me, Doris Kendrick also met Gerald Wadringham, because he and I were betrothed and almost inseparable. We became members of a small party aboard her yacht. It was to be a week's cruise. It was, in fact, a week's carousal for most of the young folks on board. Doris Kendrick set the pace. Among those who kept most boisterously in step with her was Gerald Wadringham. They lost themselves in passionate fascination for each other. At the height of the maniacal revelry, they were *married* by the captain aboard."

She paused, to regain her ebbing composure, but the Falcon waited silently.

"Only a few of us were aware of what had taken place," Lady Miriam continued. "It happened on the bridge of the yacht—the culmination of a mad alcoholic impulse. I was present as one of the witnesses. Stockton Mullins was the other."

"*Mullins!*"

"Doris Kendrick seemed to have brought him along as part of her more intimate retinue. Gerald was ecstatic when the thing had been done. He dashed madly to the wireless room—sent a message of a single word to his parents in Kensington."

"A single word?"

"Just the word *married*, and his name."

Lady Miriam shivered, although the interior of the limousine was warm, almost close.

"We saw little of Gerald or Doris about the ship during the next forty-eight hours," she added. "Not until we were headed up the Thames on our return, in fact. There was a meeting-in-council in my cabin. The tempestuous romance had withered quickly. Gerald was both ashamed and afraid. He foresaw the end of a career that had barely begun. It already had been settled that he was to have an important post. He knew he would be dropped—discredited—in every circle that was dear to him. Our betrothal was widely known—our marriage regarded imminent."

When Lady Miriam halted, the Falcon said: "He was willing to escape from his hasty bargain, I take it. What about the young lady?"

"Strangely, or perhaps not strangely," Lady Miriam answered, "Doris Kendrick was equally willing to cancel the monstrous contract. There was a difference between the two. Gerald was like a man sinking in his own despair.

Doris was flippant, indifferent—snapped her fingers at it all. But, don't you see, there was the *wireless* Gerald had sent."

"I was thinking of that."

"Which is why it was necessary for me to save Gerald—before his family and his professional sponsors."

"*Save* him?"

"Besides Gerald and myself, only Doris Kendrick and Stockton Mullins were aware of the plan we adopted. Doris found it amusing—fell into it readily. Mullins seemed genuinely gratified. You see, when we left the yacht, *I* pretended to have been the woman Gerald had married—ever since, I have *pretended* to be Gerald's wife—to be Lady Miriam *Wadringham.*"

"You did that for him?"

"We had been in love since children—our families were close—our friends the same. For the first time in his life, Gerald had been inflamed by alcohol and passion and a scintillating young woman. He made an error. It would have cost him too much—that solitary error."

When there had been a long silence, the Falcon said:

"So Stockton Mullins harbored, for two years, the knowledge that neither Doris Kendrick nor you was legally married to your present husbands—that Doris Kendrick, in fact, committed bigamy."

"To which," Lady Miriam said, "he added a consuming hatred for Doris Kendrick when she impetuously was married to Captain Haldane, almost as soon as she had returned to the States."

The Falcon mused over that a moment.

"Hatred? You mean he could have expected—"

He left the thought unfinished but, in the dark corner of the car, his eyes narrowed as an amazing conjecture gripped him. He appeared only indifferently interested when he asked:

"Do I understand, Lady Miriam, that the overture that brought you to New York emanated from the Carthaven Social Counselors?"

"Yes. A British representative consulted with my—with Gerald. I am not familiar with the details."

"From *meeting* Carthaven, did you form an impression of his enterprise?"

"I am satisfied he has encyclopedic information which he employs for purposes other than to promote social contacts."

"You were required to proceed rather under Mr. Carthaven's directions?"

"Yes. Not until I had been in his offices did I learn that Stockton Mullins was really engineering things."

"By the way, Lady Miriam, didn't Mullins, after you ran across to him upon discovering the major's body, tell you your brother was the murderer?"

"He didn't mention Carleton. He insisted—pretended to believe—that *I* had caused the death of Major Haldane. He agreed to get the body out of my room after dark but he held the new threat of exposure over me. That is why I had to play so miserably false to you."

From the back seat they had paid no attention to the course over which the Sarge had directed the limousine. The car drew softly to a stop at a densely tree-lined curb.

"Just about *there*, chief," the Sarge announced.

Lady Miriam straightened, aroused. Until now, she had made no inquiry concerning their destination.

The Falcon glanced through the window at his side. Through the dense, low foliage he caught just an occasional blinking of the brightly lighted plaza beyond the nearby viaduct.

"We'll wait here just a bit, old timer," the Falcon said to the Sarge.

"Where are we?" Lady Miriam asked.

"In a moment or two," the Falcon replied drily, "we shall deposit you conveniently close to the plaza entrance of Marmont Manor."

"*There?* You've brought me *back?*"

"It occurred to me you'd want to square your unpaid account."

"That, surely, but—what am I to tell them?"

"The truth. That's always easier."

She sank back weakly against the cushions, for the moment speechless. When, after some seconds, she seemed hopelessly baffled, the Falcon said:

"You will be able to profit from various of the conjectures which the kindly disposed newspaper reporters incorporated in their accounts of Marmont's amazing rupture. It has been hinted you were kidnaped."

"Kidnaped?"

"Which will be an apt way for you to describe your forced departure by the balcony exit with Mullins and Carthaven, except, of course, you will omit names."

Lady Miriam began to breathe more easily.

"That sometimes happens to the unwilling witness of a murder—that, or worse," the Falcon explained. "If my general description is inaccurate, you may correct me. Two men entered your room, one pursuing the other. Your door could have been standing just slightly ajar. You witnessed a vicious murder. The murderer compelled you to abandon your room with him. You were taken to a house on Long Island, kept prisoner there until late last night, then brought to a New York hotel, where again you were held prisoner, by threats, until this afternoon. Again your room was the scene of murder, after which you were brought back to Marmont by your abductor tonight. With some slight

variations, does that about describe your movements since Friday night?"

"The most pointed variation being to put *you* in the role of my abductor. Can I *possibly* be believed if I tell that?"

"It is always well to tell voluntarily those things which are likely to be proved against you," the Falcon counseled. "The police will be eminently grateful for your help in connecting the Marmont incidents with this afternoon's affair at the Sentinel Hotel, and to link the Northpoint home of Stockton Mullins with the proceedings. You will remember, of course, that you were brought back from there to New York in a launch. I have an idea that you will be able to display bruises on your arms, attesting to the fact that you were bound to a chair."

"And I shall be *believed*—that I was in complete ignorance of what was really going on?" Lady Miriam persisted.

"The very commendable commissioner of police of this pleasant little suburb will receive a letter in the morning mail," the Falcon said. "You'll find him, I'm sure, not only credulous but sympathetic. You see, it will be a distinct point for the police to find the fugitive Stanley Matthews in the slain Stockton Mullins."

"I'm trying to absorb some of your marvelous confidence."

"Oh, yes. By all means mention that, when the two men crashed into your room in the Manor, you telephoned Mr. Jeffries Gate in room B-16."

"*You!*"

"You had met me in the afternoon bridge game. Knowing no one else in the hotel, in your sudden panic you thought of me—got me on the 'phone—but the instrument was torn from you almost at once."

"I am to tell *that*—to involve *you*, Mr. Gate?"

"It happens," the Falcon explained drily, "that the police *know* about that call and its precipitate termination."

"How completely you set the stage for me," Lady Miriam said, fascinated in spite of her apprehension. Then she caught her breath suddenly.

"But about Major Haldane?" she queried.

A low chuckle escaped from the Sarge.

"You won't find it necessary to mention the major, Lady Miriam," the Falcon said. "It happens that only our big friend and I know that his body was detained in your room before it was deposited among the rocks near the Manor drive. I'm sure you will recognize it was only expediency that caused me to present a slightly false implication on that point to you this afternoon."

"I'm rather glad of the falsehood," she said quickly. "It opened the way to such splendid understanding."

The Sarge eased the long car through the railroad underpass. Only seconds later, he nosed it against a curbed, densely shrubbed island, in the plaza parking space alongside the station platform. From the shadowed interior of the limousine, the occupants looked out upon the brightly lighted vista of Marmont's civic center, the blinking lights of the Manor peeping down from the shrouded bluff above them to the left.

"Guess I might as well drop your letter in th' box over in front of th' postoffice, chief," the Sarge suggested.

"Splendid, old timer."

The Sarge moved away, across the plaza. Lady Miriam turned to face the Falcon—close—her breath upon his chin. He sensed the tremor that passed over her body.

"I suppose I *am* a wife—I am, *in fact*, of course—"

"You've made a staggering sacrifice," he said.

"I wasn't thinking of that—it's only—well, there is in a woman an affection, an emotion, which, I imagine, more

often goes starved for want of an object. That is why it is so rare that I should have met you—shall be able to take with me the memory of you. It isn't only the magnificent mystery about you—your competence—"

"I am woefully ignorant about affection," the Falcon protested.

"Except the feeling you bear for your admirable big friend."

Suddenly she raised her hands—held his long face between her trembling palms. She looked into his face a long moment that way.

"You won't mind?" she murmured faintly.

Her lips closed upon his. They lingered there—not passionately, but as if in communion.

When she drew back from him, weak, she could not know—she only hoped—there had been a response.

He remained silent—not aroused—yet uncomfortably stirred. Again it was left to Lady Miriam to break the silence.

"When I have been able to turn my back again on Marmont—you see, I am no longer doubting your magic," she said, "when I have returned, *in good order*, to the Ashley-Belgrade, could I possibly expect that you would want to see that I am safe?"

She was unwilling to await his answer, as if fearing the words she would hear. Instead, she hurried from the car—moved swiftly along the station platform.

A moment later the Sarge was back at the wheel. The Falcon joined him on the front seat.

"Cripes, chief!" the big fellow exclaimed, genuinely moved, "I hope her story goes over."

"I have an idea it will, old man," the Falcon said soberly. "The postmark on my letter will convince the commissioner that I really returned Lady Miriam to Marmont."

CHAPTER XXVII

FILED FOR REFERENCE

THE DISORDERED TRAY BORE EVIDENCE OF THE HASTILY snatched luncheon with which the Falcon had contented himself. He had returned at once to his absorbing task at his desk. His pen had been moving rapidly over a succession of pages in his black leather-bound book.

The Sarge found him still so engaged when he arrived in the ninth-floor suite in the Copley-Vendome. It was more than two hours past noon when the big fellow bustled in enthusiastically, a bundle of newspapers under one arm. He eyed the tray.

"Been hard at it, hunh, chief?"

"The unexpected distraction in our week-end provided a most nutritious entry for this record, old man."

"Yeh, I guess so."

"As it happens, however, I am just about up to the moment."

"Plenty in these afternoon papers," the Sarge volunteered. "Guess you ain't seen 'em?"

"No, but I imagine Marmont is still prominently mentioned."

"Mostly about *you*, chief. Th' headlines, anyway. Th' police think they got th' whole thing worked out—all they gotta do is find *you*."

"Interesting."

The Sarge countered seriously:

"You got Lady Miriam out of it okay, chief, but your note makes th' police put th' whole bill up to you—every-

thing that happened in Marmont and at th' Sentinel—th' whole business."

"But they aren't really searching for Malcolm J. Wingate," the Falcon comforted, "or even for my old friend, Steve Hardy."

"No," the Sarge acknowledged, chuckling into a brighter mood. "Just s'posed to be lookin' for th' Falcon, without knowin' who they're lookin' for. Some of th' reporters had it doped maybe Mullins was th' Falcon, when they found out he was th' same as Matthews, only they couldn't figure how he coulda been out to Marmont last night after he was finished at th' Sentinel in th' afternoon. They ain't got no line on Lady Miriam's brother. Seems he was careful—nothin' in his clothes to identify him. And Lady Miriam pulled a smart one. She told th' police she was blindfolded almost th' whole time."

"I rather felt she could be relied upon for co-operation."

The Sarge spread out the first page of one of the newspapers. Prominently boxed, beneath heavy headlines across the page, the following was presented in bold type:

> This morning's mail brought to Police Commissioner Marcus Baldwin, of Marmont, the following terse, arrogant communication:
>
> I am returning Lady Miriam
> Wadringham. Sorry it was
> expedient to make her my unwilling companion.
>
> The Falcon.
>
> Typing and stationery were identical with such communications as have brought this mysterious, elusive character to public notice on previous occasions. The letter was mailed in front of the Marmont postoffice, less than a hundred feet from the police station.

"Th' police and newspapers ain't gettin' nowhere tryin' to put all this stuff together," the Sarge said over the Falcon's shoulder.

"It doesn't really matter, old timer, since all of the guilty persons already have paid."

"Yeh, sure. It'd be a big help to 'em if they could have a squint at that black book of yours, chief. Guess your story reads up about finished, hunh?"

The Falcon's eyes narrowed.

"I arrive abruptly at some fascinating, unanswered questions," he confessed.

"Yeh?"

"Here they are, briefly: Why did Doris Kendrick so willingly *give up* Gerald Wadringham after their marriage? Why did Mullins *hate* Doris for marrying Captain Haldane? Why didn't Mullins blackmail Doris Haldane *directly* instead of making it appear that Lady Miriam was making the demand? Why was the threat made to expose the truth to Major Haldane instead of to Doris's husband? Why did Mullins kill Bob Dale? And finally, why was Carthaven brought into the deal?"

"Lotta questions, chief," the Sarge summarized, rubbing his chin. "I was thinkin' about th' way you sized up th' thing yesterday. Named all th' suspects that coulda murdered th' major and said only one was left. You wasn't countin' on Lady Miriam's brother, hunh?"

"I was eliminating everyone, except the vague young man who delivered the note, because of a total absence of possible motive to murder the major. Even Mullins could have had no motive. That left only the source of the note —whoever had a reason to send Major Haldane to Lady Miriam's room could have had a motive to kill him. That was the one remaining logical deduction."

"But they musta been somebody else in on it, chief? Somebody to make th' call that got th' major to th' telephone booth at just th' right time."

The Falcon grinned vaguely.

"That would appear reasonable, at first glance. But not necessarily accurate."

"No?"

"The time fitted so exactly, in fact, as to discourage the theory. It happens there is a telephone pay-station booth in the ground floor elevator corridor. It was simple for Carleton Illingstaire to make a call from that booth, ask for the major, ride up in an elevator and give the note to a bellboy at exactly the right moment."

The Sarge beamed his approval.

"Which reminds me," the Falcon added. "You need to make an addition to that very excellent list of murder motives you propounded a day or two ago."

"Yeh? What, chief?"

"To silence a threat against family honor."

"Gotta know a *lot* to figure on *that* bein' th' motive."

The Falcon jumped up suddenly.

"We have just one chance, old timer, to find the missing answers that will complete my record of this diverting week-end."

"A chance, chief?"

"All of the questions I mentioned a moment ago point to one inescapable conclusion: there was *something* between Doris Kendrick and Stockton Mullins, and your friend Carthaven, so expertly removed by Lady Miriam's brother in his campaign of extermination, possessed the necessary information about it to be counted in on the little extortion enterprise. You may recall hearing Lady Miriam state that he and her brother even had gone so far as to evolve

an alternative scheme of their own."

"Sure, but how we gonna get a line on what Carthaven knew about Doris Haldane and Mullins?"

The Falcon already had closed his desk and was crossing the room for his hat.

"If you don't mind passing up your lounging engagement with your favorite chair," he said, "we should be able to drop around at the offices of the Carthaven Social Counselors within less than twenty minutes."

The door a bare dozen feet from the group of elevators on the nineteenth floor of the downtown Zeller Block afforded access to a paneled room of quietly elegant appointments. A harmonizingly elegant young woman, seated behind a modernistic creation, arched her thin brows patiently in acknowledgment of the Falcon's approach.

"Mr. Carthaven's personal files, please; where would I find them?" the Falcon bit out, in a tone which encouraged instant co-operation.

"Which files would you mean?" the young woman inquired.

"Confidential records."

"Of course, there's a safe in his office but Mr. Carthaven, you know—"

"Dead. Yes, I know. But someone would be in charge."

"Well, Mr. Wilmer Prouty is in Mr. Carthaven's office now. What is the nature—"

"Thanks. I'll see Mr. Prouty."

The Falcon turned immediately for the ground-glass door that bore in small lettering: *Mr. Carthaven.*

Acting belatedly, the young woman rose.

"I'll take your name to Mr. Prouty," she offered, rounding her desk at a speed inspired by the Falcon's apparent intention.

In her haste, the young woman collided squarely with the huge bulk of the Sarge, who chose that precise moment to cross the room. Before she had succeeded in recovering her poise, she saw the ground-glass door jerked open, and an instant later she saw it close upon the Falcon.

In the room beyond the door, a man stood before a tall open safe. He turned at the sound of the closing door, looked inquiringly at the intruder.

"Hello, Prouty," the Falcon saluted casually.

The man addressed scanned the visitor, surprise and doubt mingled in his expression. He stepped back from the safe, affecting nonchalance as he pushed the heavy steel door toward the opening. But its swing was arrested before it had moved six inches. The Falcon stood wedged in the remaining aperture.

"We'll need this *open*, I imagine," he said drily.

"I don't *get* you—who *are* you?"

"Let's check over these records," the Falcon suggested.

"What records, and why? Say, *get the hell* away from this safe!"

Prouty made the mistake of emphasizing the command with a gesture. The Falcon caught the threatening arm at the wrist. Prouty struggled to reach a pocket. Pain shot through his pinioned arm. He was a split-second too late in his decision to call out. The intention was paralyzed as the Falcon's free fist crashed against the unprotected jaw.

At the second blow, Prouty sagged, mouth agape, but he did not thump to the floor. The Falcon, still gripping the one arm, permitted the slumping figure to ease to the thick rug.

An instant later the Falcon was at the door through which he had entered the room. He opened it a mere foot, peered out.

"He wants to see you, too, old man," he called through the opening.

The Sarge rose. The young woman, again seated behind her desk, awarded merely a glance toward the opened door. The Sarge had restored her self-complacence. Evidently, she decided, Mr. Prouty had found nothing untoward in the intrusion.

When the door was again closed, the Sarge emitted a low chuckle.

"Didn't hafta waste much time, did you, chief?"

"That door over there," the Falcon indicated, "may possibly lead to an unoccupied room. If so, Mr. Prouty, in his present indisposition, may find it a bit more comfortable in there."

"Sure, chief."

The Falcon was already at the open safe. He disregarded the ensuing activity in which the Sarge engaged—merely nodded when the big fellow announced, "Th' room'll do swell."

Inside the steel vault, the Falcon came upon rows of large, heavy yellow envelopes. Each was captioned with a name in an upper corner. They were arranged alphabetically.

Only seconds elapsed before the Falcon stepped away from the safe clutching four of the envelopes. He crossed to a large flat-top desk, sat in the swivel chair behind it.

"Interesting labels on these envelopes, old timer," he mumbled.

"Yeh?"

"Haldane, Kendrick, Mullins and Wadringham."

"Stuff on *all* of 'em, hunh?"

"We'll have a look into the Mullins packet first."

The Falcon's fingers shuffled rapidly through the con-

tents of the envelope: papers of various sizes, typed lists, handwritten memoranda, photostatic copies.

"Our late friend Carthaven seems to have had access to unlimited original sources of information," he commented. "He must have been unusually well informed concerning Mullins—"

The Falcon stopped short as a thin sheaf of papers, clipped together, arrested his attention. Uppermost under the clip was a photostatic copy of a canceled bank-check. The amount was two hundred thousand dollars. It was made payable to the order of Stockton Mullins.

But what interested the Falcon most was the signature at the bottom of the check. In a bold flourishing script appeared the name: *Doris Kendrick.*

Studying the date of the collected check a moment, the Falcon observed: "I begin to suspect, old man, why Mullins was hardly in position to make demands of Doris Haldane in his own name—why he needed to use Lady Miriam as his proxy."

"Yeh, chief?"

"He exacted rather a substantial payment from the young woman almost as soon as her yacht had returned to these shores—hurriedly, it appears, before she became the bride of Captain Haldane."

"I wondered, chief, why he woulda waited two years to collect, when she put him in such a soft seat."

But the Falcon was already engaged in an intent study of another document included in the same sheaf. There was the barest hint of awakened interest in his tone when he announced quietly:

"So your friend Mullins also had a marital venture to his credit."

"Yeh?"

"And for some reason, the obviously thorough Mr. Carthaven considered it of sufficient moment to provide his files with a photostatic copy of the marriage certificate. Mullins, it appears, married one Della Kraft in New Orleans a little more than five years ago."

"Ditched her, I guess, and Carthaven had it handy so he could hold it over Mullins."

The Falcon squinted across at the Sarge.

"But odd, wouldn't you say, that it should be clipped to Doris Kendrick's check?"

"Cripes!"

The Falcon studied the paper, flipped it over. There was a bare tightening of his lips when he discovered a penciled memo on the otherwise blank back—a mere notation that read: *See also Kendrick file.*

"Research, old timer," he commented facetiously, "becomes a distinct pleasure when records are intelligently annotated and cross-indexed."

"Guess I don't know a lot about that," the Sarge confessed.

The Falcon gathered the papers he had been examining and replaced them in their envelope, pushing it aside. He picked up a second envelope.

"Our study now progresses to the Kendrick exhibit," he announced.

Uppermost among the papers he extracted from the envelope, the Falcon again came upon a clipped sheaf. His attention at once became riveted upon a penned note attached immediately under the clip.

"Handwriting with which I have had opportunity to become unusually familiar," he mused aloud. "Young Illingstaire seemed less careful about leaving specimens of his writing behind than he was about removing evidences of

identification from his person before his call at the Sentinel yesterday afternoon."

"Somethin' he wrote, chief?"

"Highly enlightening, when linked with information already at hand. Not only dated last Friday but painstakingly timed. It is quite logical to gather that Carleton Illingstaire called at this office to see Carthaven at 2:45 Friday afternoon. Carthaven was out but was expected to return. Illingstaire decided he could not delay his trip to Marmont, so he wrote this note on a piece of office memorandum paper and left it for Carthaven. This explains why Carthaven arrived at Marmont Manor in the evening, accompanied by such trustworthy aids as Slug and Koster. It explains also why the young man did not appear in the bridge game to receive the bonds which fell into my hands."

"Why, chief?"

"Merely that young Illingstaire changed his plans when it was too late to make that change known to those who were proceeding according to earlier arrangements. But he *did* intend to avert delivery of the bonds—it was not anticipated that someone else would be mistaken by Bob Dale as the proper recipient of the package entrusted to him by Doris Haldane."

The Sarge had moved alongside the desk—glanced over his chief's shoulder. Puzzled surprise widened his clear eyes when he discovered that the note the Falcon was studying consisted of only four lines of handwritten script.

"You mean he's got all that in th' note, chief?" he asked curiously.

The Falcon grinned.

"Most of it is between the lines, and interpretation is aided, of course, by the fact that it happens to be attached to papers in Carthaven's file concerning Doris Kendrick."

"Oh!"

"This memo merely reads: 'Going out to work my plan. We must leave M out of it. Will get old man away to M's room and hold him. Come out after dark.' No signature—not even initials."

"Why do you s'pose Carthaven *saved* that note, chief—put it in *there?*"

"Your late and lamented friend Carthaven, old timer, observed an invariable rule to preserve and file anything that possibly could be used, at some future date, to incriminate or intimidate a prospective victim of his intricate processes."

"What kinda plan do you figure Lady Miriam's brother coulda had?"

"First of all, old man, we are able now to understand how it happened that the note to Major Haldane was written on the back of a business card of Carthaven Social Counselors. It is reasonable to suppose that after young Illingstaire finished writing this memo to Carthaven *here*, he picked up a card and inscribed the message he intended for the major. As you know, the delivery of the message *did* succeed in disbanding the assemblage on the veranda. *I* must accept the blame that the young man's intentions did not succeed in every particular."

"*You*, chief?"

"I committed the blunder of lingering at the abandoned card table—loitering there long enough to be on hand when Bob Dale arrived with the bonds."

The Sarge chuckled.

"Oh, that!"

"Then," the Falcon pursued, "I believe we may safely agree with Lady Miriam that the plan of Carthaven and her brother, while involving the major, did not contemplate his murder."

"*What*, you think?"

"Just a hazarded guess, of course. Carthaven was to arrive after dark. Let us presume for purposes of kidnaping."

"Th' *major*, chief?"

"Likely. Demand then could have been made upon Doris Haldane for a considerably larger amount. Moreover, Mullins could have been counted out of a division of the spoils."

"*Counted out!* How?"

"This brief note makes it clear that Illingstaire insisted upon employing a threat of exposure that would *not* involve his sister—the old germ of *family honor* at work. The demand upon Doris Haldane therefore was to be accompanied, in order to force silent compliance, by a threat to expose something other than her marriage to Gerald Wadringham. Incidentally, we may assume that silent withdrawal was to have been forced upon Mullins by the identical threat. Carthaven, you already may have gathered, was a genius at holding a great many high cards in his own hand."

"What was he gonna threaten to spring, chief?"

"We may possibly discover the answer to your question by going farther through these attached papers. We may bear in mind, in the meantime, of course, that the delivery of the bonds to me, Mullins' disclosures to Major Haldane, and the subsequent murder of the major, completely disordered the stage-setting and altered immediate purposes by the time Carthaven and his cohorts arrived in Marmont Manor."

The Falcon paused in study over a typewritten form.

"We are progressing rapidly, old man," he announced.

"Yeh?"

"A copy of the receipt Mullins gave to Doris Kendrick in exchange for the two hundred thousand dollar check. An

absolute quit-claim, in fact."

"A *what*, chief?"

"In precise, technical, legal verbiage, Stockton Mullins deposed that he then and forever did release Doris Kendrick from any and all claims, bonds, restraints, alliances and whatsoever which he held, real or implied, against her."

"Cripes! What could—"

"And here we come upon," the Falcon interrupted, "an identical photostatic copy of the marriage certificate of Stockton Mullins and Della Kraft, duly executed by a magistrate of New Orleans."

"In *that* envelope, too! Why—"

"Hadn't you caught the symphonic harmony, old man? *Della Kraft—Doris Kendrick*—the proverbial euphony that springs from mortal invention."

An intended exclamation died on the thick lips of the Sarge.

The door from the outer office was swung open briskly. A short, thick-set man came through aggressively.

The newcomer closed the door behind him decisively as he faced the Falcon across the broad surface of the flat-top desk.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A DEAL IS CLOSED

IT WAS AT ONCE APPARENT THAT THE UNEXPECTED INTRUDER was not disposed to waste time on formalities. He covered the distance to the desk with short, quick steps.

Arrived there, he shifted his felt hat to the back of his broad head and leaned down, his hands outspread on the desk. The Falcon regarded him blankly.

"Your young lady was tied up on the 'phone so I came right in, Prouty," the newcomer announced in rapid-fire monotone.

The Falcon accepted the mistaken identity without change of expression. The Sarge managed less capably to conceal his surprise. His thick lips parted into the first stages of a grin. But the dynamic new arrival was concentrating his beady attention upon the long face behind the desk.

"I'm Jacob Bogholt," he confided, glancing at his wrist-watch significantly. "Right on the dot, you'll notice. And I'm ready to close that deal I called you up about on the 'phone this morning. Maybe we could be private?"

For the first time the thick-set man acknowledged the Sarge's presence. But he did it with a twisted scowl.

"Certainly, Bogholt," the Falcon agreed blandly.

He grimaced to the Sarge.

"You might be looking into that situation in the other room," he suggested.

The Sarge ambled away promptly but he no longer denied himself the prerogative of grinning. He did not entirely close the door when he withdrew to the adjoining room.

"Well, Bogholt?" the Falcon challenged.

"It's like I promised on the 'phone. No hitch. My clients will pay a hundred grand for the stuff from your files. Thirty per cent to me, of course."

While he spoke, Bogholt glanced searchingly at the large envelopes on the desk.

"Guess you got the stuff ready, looks like," he added quickly. "I'm shaving my cut when I make it only thirty per cent."

"Don't you generally collect your fees from your clients?" the Falcon asked coldly.

"Fees from my clients, sure, but in a deal like this—"

"I've heard Stokey Mullins mention you," the Falcon interrupted. "You were his lawyer, I believe—in certain matters. I imagine he put you a thousand or so out of pocket, on that business of *springing* Philip Koster yesterday morning, since he wasn't on hand to reimburse you today."

"How do you know about *that?*" Bogholt queried uneasily.

"I make it a *point* to know things about people who come in to do business with me."

Bogholt wet his lips nervously.

"So you will look to your clients for your fee, Bogholt," the Falcon stipulated. "We'll drop the discussion about percentages."

"But Carthaven always played cards with me right," the crestfallen lawyer protested.

The Falcon's tone froze.

"It is my impression," he said, "that Mr. Carthaven has permanently retired from the affairs of this office."

"You won't go far high-hatting it like that."

The Falcon's eyes narrowed to mere slits.

"I don't recall retaining your services," he said. "Certain events transpired yesterday, prompting you, I presume, to go in early quest of lucrative clients today. As I understand it, you have interested such clients in purchasing, at the price you mentioned, certain records from the Carthaven files. Being a shrewd lawyer, I should imagine you already have banked your fee for the day's enterprise. Do I understand you have the money with you to close the deal?"

"My clients have."

"From which I am to infer that you have your clients with you?"

"Outside, yes."

"Excellent. Show them in. It is my invariable rule to deal with principals."

The enraged lawyer debated only an instant. He crossed quickly to the door, opened it, beckoned.

Two seconds later, peering across at the opening, the Falcon saw Doris Haldane enter the room. She was followed by Captain Farragut Porter Haldane.

There was just an instant when an exclamation from the startled woman appeared imminent. But even while the Falcon was rising, with polished politeness, she mastered her surprise and surveyed him in cold silence. It was at once evident that her husband failed to recognize the Falcon, from the brief glimpse he had had of his mother's visitor in Marmont Manor.

The Falcon's voice commanded attention the moment Bogholt had closed the door. The mere identity of the callers enabled him to frame his speech with confidence.

"Your attorney advises me," he said, "that you wish to purchase certain records from the Carthaven files, in view of the unexpected demise of Mr. Carthaven. The records, that is, which appear in the Kendrick and Haldane files."

The Falcon's ferreting gaze rested upon the round, florid face of Captain Haldane. The latter shrugged uncomfortably, nodded toward the woman.

Doris Haldane fumbled with her bag.

"You will accept government bonds in payment, I'm *sure*," she said pointedly.

The Falcon transferred his gaze to the troubled features of the lawyer.

"If the gentlemen will withdraw," he said blandly, "I'm certain the lady and I shall arrive at terms promptly."

There was a moment of embarrassing confusion, which the Falcon's stolid countenance did little to relieve. Without debate, Captain Haldane led the way. The lawyer followed him to the outer office.

The Falcon fixed a chair at one end of the desk. Doris Haldane accepted the implied invitation.

"Why the drama?" she inquired, drily sarcastic. "Your business seems to be collecting government bonds. So my *first* guess was right—you *were a plant in that bridge game.*"

The Falcon allowed a vague grin—otherwise it could have been doubted that he heard her. His attention was upon a sheet of paper on which he wrote rapidly.

Doris Haldane regarded him—puzzled—perversely fascinated—reflecting upon the earlier crossings of their paths.

At length the Falcon looked up. He placed a blank sheet of paper on the desk before her—offered her his pen.

"The records you want are available," he said to her quietly. "But the payment doesn't happen to be in bonds. You need merely copy and sign this form."

He passed across to her the sheet on which he had been writing. She glanced at it, her lips curled.

"You've got hold of *that*, too, have you?" she demanded querulously.

"The name Della Kraft was a transparent disguise," he said.

"But why would I do this for *her?*"

"You rather *owe* it to Lady Miriam, I'd say."

"A *bitch* that held me up for a hundred thousand, just because things aren't breaking too well for her man?"

The Falcon squinted at the woman patiently.

"You don't really believe, do you, that *Lady Miriam* was demanding that payment?"

"Then *who?*"

"Stockton Mullins was no longer in a position to make *direct* demands of you. But he *was* in position to intimidate Lady Miriam."

Her lips tightened. She looked squarely into the grooved eyes beside her.

"That—well, you don't call a man a bastard after he's dead, do you?" she said sourly.

The Falcon studied her, amused that she had changed so easily into the mood she had disclosed to him Saturday night.

"You show up in funny roles," she said lightly. "I wasn't expecting to bump into a Good Samaritan in this joint. Where will this get *me* if I copy this and sign it?"

"Into the undying gratitude of Lady Miriam, I'd say."

"And for that you're passing up a hundred thousand! Okay."

She copied what he had written, while he looked on—then signed boldly: *Doris Kendrick Haldane.*

"Only this for the story of my life—that's all you want,

is it?" she asked, pushing the completed document toward him.

"That, and an answer to a question."

"Oh! Something more! *Shoot!*"

"Who was Bob Dale?"

"You're not going to—"

"I haven't the slightest intention to disturb his remains. But I am just a bit fastidious about having complete details in my records—personal records, you understand, which serve no commercial purpose whatsoever."

"Well, I *don't* understand, but it can't hurt for you to know a little more. Bob Dale was my confidential secretary. I picked him up in Paris—a busted American art student—no family and not a dime."

"So there is no one to worry about his absence. Why would Mullins have murdered him?"

Doris Haldane stared at him, amazed.

"Mullins did *that?* He never met Bob—didn't *know* him. I've *got* it. Just my sending Bob with the bonds did it. Mullins would have bashed in anybody he thought had an inside track with me."

"Except Captain Haldane."

"Well, I stopped him there *in advance* with a check."

"Rather an easy settlement, I'd say."

"Because of New Orleans, you mean," she said. "Well, Mullins never was sure how much I could dig out of the cellar about him. I carried him on my payroll a long time before I settled."

The Falcon picked up the paper she had written, passed over to her the two large envelopes labeled *Haldane* and *Kendrick.*

"You may want these for your memoirs," he suggested drily. "I'll ask the captain to attest your signature on this

paper. I'll fold under all except the signature."

"Don't bother doing that," she said. "It won't be news to him. He's broadminded about my early career."

The concluding formalities were brief when Doris Haldane had recalled the two men. Captain Haldane officiated with disinterest as witness to her signature. Bogholt looked on dumbly, his lower lip drooped.

Only when the three visitors had reached the door did Doris Haldane turn—walk back to where the Falcon stood beside the desk.

"If our worlds aren't too far apart," she said softly, "could we shake hands? There are a lot of things we both know and, to borrow a tired business man's platitude, *you're different.*"

The Falcon grinned faintly as her palm rested lightly in his strong hand. He was still grinning when he turned from the closed door and walked across to summon the Sarge.

"How's the patient?" he inquired.

"He's kinda come around, chief, but he can't exactly move much, th' way I got him fixed up in a chair. Lucky you was on hand to take care of that business with Bogholt."

"Decidedly lucky," the Falcon agreed.

He squinted at the Sarge a moment.

"Our business here is concluded, old timer, but something has just occurred to me. Carthaven Social Counselors would be just about out of business without those files in the safe."

The Sarge's eyes brightened. He needed no further prompting. In a moment he was at the vault, making a loose heap of the contents of the hundreds of envelopes.

"You might start it with this," the Falcon said, touch-

ing the flame of his pocket-lighter to the Wadringham packet.

"Sure, chief."

The Falcon extracted from the Mullins envelope a single item: the photostatic copy of the Mullins-Kraft marriage certificate. To it he attached the document Doris Haldane had inscribed for him in lieu of a hundred thousand dollars.

He folded the two papers—stowed them into a coat pocket. The remainder of the Mullins data he turned over to the Sarge—added fuel for the flames already gaining headway.

The safe door was moved to within a crack of being closed—just enough opening to provide an air-current for the blaze. The two companions stood by, watching in silence, as thin streams of smoke began to curl from the crack at the top of the heavy door and waver across the room to the open windows.

Only when the interior of the almost closed safe had become a raging furnace—when tongues of flame began to leap through the narrow aperture—did the Sarge kick the heavy door shut to close off the smoke and smother the blaze.

"Guess th' stuff won't be much use to these palookas now," he said.

They passed into the outer office. When the precise young woman at the desk glanced up, sniffing the odor that had pursued them, the Falcon said:

"Mr. Prouty is expecting you in the room beyond Mr. Carthaven's office."

They were moving north breezily over the West Side elevated highway, dodging the tangle of late afternoon traffic below. The Falcon was at the wheel of the gray roadster.

"On the whole, a fruitful afternoon, old man," he commented.

"Plenty," the Sarge agreed. "Surprised me most, her bringin' Captain Haldane along."

"Which afforded an answer to one of our questions."

"Yeh?"

"Explained *why* Mullins threatened exposure to Major Haldane. Obviously, there was nothing to expose to the husband."

"A kinda rotten limb of th' Haldane tree, th' captain. Looks like he wasn't partic'lar."

"Except possibly about her bank account."

"Oh, sure. Cripes! They ain't sure 'nough married, *are* they, chief?"

"An intricate status now, old man. Since Doris Kendrick was really the wife of Mullins, she did not become the wife of Gerald Wadringham on the yacht. Now that Mullins is dead, there is no actual impediment to the Haldane relationship. Which reminds me."

"What, chief?"

"You might take a look at your very excellent dinner clothes—make sure they are in press."

"I'll be needin' 'em?"

"We'll be dining at the Ashley-Belgrade tonight and I have a suspicion that the *maître d'hôtel* of that excellent hostelry leans just a trifle toward the conventions."

"I guess so."

"Moreover, we'll be dining with a young British woman of title."

"Oh!"

As the Sarge relieved himself of that exclamation, the Falcon reached into a pocket—passed over to the big fellow the clipped papers he had brought with him from Car-

thaven's office.

"We shall be wishing Lady Miriam Wadringham *bon voyage* by presenting her with this," the Falcon explained.

The Sarge glanced at Doris Haldane's penned scrawl. He read:

> To Lady Miriam Wadringham:
> This will certify to you that I was not legally free to become the wife of Gerald Wadringham.
> Doris Kendrick Haldane.
>
> Witnessed:
> Farragut Porter Haldane

"And it's fastened to a copy of th' other marriage certificate," the Sarge approved enthusiastically. "It sure closes th' book, chief. But just where does that set Lady Miriam?"

"She at least will understand that she is the *common law wife* of Gerald Wadringham—that no legal barrier has stood between them."

"Anyway," the Sarge proposed thoughtfully, "her and Wadringham can sneak away quiet somewhere and have th' knot tied, if she's still finicky about havin' it reg'lar."

"I'm going to let *you* make that happy suggestion to her, old man."

The Sarge rubbed his chin, troubled.

"I kinda think, chief, Lady Miriam would like it a lot better if it was just *you* showin' up to have dinner with her tonight."

The Falcon grinned patiently.

"That's one of the reasons why *you* are coming along, you old son-of-a-gun," he said.

THE END